

The Ruining of an Empire

On the Causes of the Marinid Decline



Cover Image: Bou Inan Madrasa Meknes. *Photo taken by the author*

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| | |
|--|----|
| List of Tables and Images | 4 |
| Tables | 4 |
| Images | 4 |
| Preface | 5 |
| Introduction | 7 |
| Chapter 1: Empires of Gold | 15 |
| The Political Economy of the Marinid Empire | 17 |
| The Marinid Empire and the Medieval Economic World System | 24 |
| The Marinid Empire and the Mali Empire | 26 |
| Chapter 2: The Army of God: The Black Death and West Africa. | 30 |
| The Black Death and the Marinid Empire | 32 |
| The Black Death and West Africa: Archaeological Evidence | 35 |
| The Black Death and West Africa: Primary Sources | 42 |
| Chapter 3: The Great Bullion Famine and the Marinid Decline | 47 |
| A Shift from West to East in the Trans-Saharan trade routes? | 49 |
| The Great Bullion Famine of the late Fifteenth Century | 51 |
| The Marinid Decline: The Succession Crisis (1358-1372) | 55 |
| The Marinid Decline: The End of the Trans-Saharan Gold Trade? | 59 |
| Conclusion | 65 |
| Bibliography: | 68 |
| Primary Sources: | 74 |

List of Tables and Images

Tables

Table 1: Tax collected according to al-‘Umarī, 18

Table 2: Estimated average of gold minted in European mints on a yearly basis, 53

Images

Image 1: Grave of Abū al-Ḥassan at Chellah, Rabat. Photo taken by the author 5

Image 2: North and West Africa in the Catalan Atlas (1387). Source:
<http://www.bigmapblog.com/2011/cresques-catalan-atlas-world-map-1387/> 15

Image 3: Qur’an once owned by Abū Ya’qūb Yūsuf. Source:
<https://ballandalus.wordpress.com/2019/01/27/quran-of-marinid-sultan-abu-yaqub-yusuf-r-1286-1307/> 23

Image 4: Two Middle Niger statuettes with buboes. Source: Bernard de Grunne and Kristina van Dyke, *Mande: Trésors Millénaires / Ancient Treasures* (Belgium: Tribal Fine Arts, 2016), 66, 68. 40

Image 5: Marinid Gold Dinar (c. 1244-1256 AD).
Source:<https://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/dynasties/northafrica/coins/c43> 47

Image 6: Marinid-era gate at Sijilmāsa. Photo taken by Lennart Visser 65

Preface



Image 1: Grave of Abū al-Ḥassan at Chellah, Rabat. *Photo taken by the author*

This thesis explores the possible connection between the Black Death and its influence on the decline of the gold trade, and the decline of the Marinid Empire. The roots for this thesis are partially found in a trip to Morocco between April and July 2018. I originally intended to find archival evidence for the spread of the Black Death in West Africa. I was inspired to do so after a talk with Gérard Chouin during the Annual Conference of the African Study Association, whose enthusiasm on the subject of the possible existence of the Black Death in West Africa had infected me. I had known the Marinid Empire and its poor reputation within modern historiography, but I had never given it too much thought. A recreational visit to the stunningly beautiful Marinid ruins of Chellah in Rabat, planted the seed of what would become this thesis. Standing by the grave of the Marinid Sultan Abū al-Ḥassan, I became aware of the fact that he had died in 1351, just after the Black Death had struck Morocco. As I visited more parts of Morocco, the surviving Marinid edifices I encountered all seemed to protest the poor reputation that their builders have to suffer, by virtue of their impressive scale and beauty. A visit to the numismatic Bank al-Maghrib Museum in Rabat finally made me realize the decline of the Marinid Empire and the possible spread of the Black Death to West Africa were two sides of the same coin. The museum's permanent exhibition told Morocco's numismatic history in chronological order and showcased a beautiful collection of old coins. When it came to the Marinids, the museum brought home two very important points. Firstly, that the Marinid gold coinage was just as impressive as the gold coinage of their more celebrated predecessors, the Almoravids and the Almohads; and secondly that Morocco faced a severe economic crisis after the death of the Marinid Sultan Abū 'Inān Fāris. This crisis was made visible by a lack of new golden coins. That this crisis occurred so quickly after the Black Death had visited Morocco (and possibly West Africa) settled the matter for me in terms of research objectives. I changed my course, and made the Marinids the focus of my research, the results of which you will find below.

Introduction

In 1347, the Marinid Sultan Abū al-Ḥassan (r. 1331-1348/1351) conquered Tunis, seemingly bringing the Marinid Empire to the height of its power. For the first time in over a century, the entirety of the Maghreb was brought under the rule of a single dynasty again. Following the collapse of the Almohad Caliphate, its North African domains were divided by three competing dynasties: The Marinids in Morocco, the Zayyanids in Algeria, and the Hafsids in Tunisia. Backed by a powerful army of mercenaries, Abū al-Ḥassan was able to outmaneuver both the Zayyanids and the Hafsids, defeating the first in 1337, and the latter when Abū al-Ḥassan took Tunis. Although it momentarily seemed that the Maghreb would be once again united under the rule of a single state, a series of dramatic events shook the Marinid Empire to its core. An outbreak of plague decimated Abū al-Ḥassan's army in April 1348. Shortly after, a coalition of Tunisian tribesmen defeated Abū al-Ḥassan and his army which forced him to abandon Tunisia. His route home barred by his rebellious son, the new Sultan Abū 'Inān Faris (r. 1348-1358), Abū al-Ḥassan was unable to reestablish control, and he died a refugee from his own son's forces. Although Abū 'Inān Faris was able to shortly restore Marinid control over the Maghreb, his death was the starting point of the empire's decline. The Marinids were quickly unable to govern any territory effectively beyond the walls of Fes, their capital.

What caused the decline of the Marinid Empire? In contemporary historiography, the causes for its the decline after the death of Abū 'Inān Faris are generally attributed to the poor functioning of the Marinid state.¹ The French historian Bernard Lugan summarized the failings of the state into three principal 'handicaps.' Firstly, Lugan stated that the Marinids lacked a large 'base ethnique,' meaning they had no access to the (tribal) manpower required to quickly conquer the decaying Almohad Empire. As such, the Marinid conquest of the western part of the Almohad Empire was slow and tedious, and it almost took a century for the Marinids to completely defeat the Almohad Empire. The second handicap was that the Marinids lacked the religious prestige that the preceding Almohad caliphs enjoyed. The Marinids did not head a religious reform movement, nor did they claim to have descended from the prophet like the Almohads had. Thirdly, the Marinids lacked the effective means to subdue the various powerful

¹ See for example: Fernando Rodríguez Mediano, "The post-Almohad dynasties in al-Andalus and the Maghrib (seventh-ninth / thirteenth-fifteenth centuries)," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam Volume 2: The Western Islamic World, Eleventh to Eighteenth Century*, 106-143, ed. Maribel Fierro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jean Brignon, Abdelaziz Amine et al., *Histoire du Maroc* (Paris: Hatier, 1967); Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *A history of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 103-118; C. R. Penell, *Morocco: from Empire to Independence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 60-77; Herman Obdeijn and Paolo De Mas, *Een Geschiedenis van Marokko* (Amsterdam, Bulaaq, 2012) 56.

Arab and Berber tribes that dominated the countryside, and were forced to carefully balance a policy of suppression with a policy of cooperation. The Marinids acquired the loyalty and services of tribes through political marriages and exchange for land while they simultaneously sought to crush tribes that became too autonomous. Lugan argued that this handing out of land accelerated the decline of the Marinid Empire, as powerful regional lords emerged while the Marinid dynasty further weakened.²

Jamil M. Abun-Nasr and Fernando Rodríguez Mediano give more nuanced reasons for the Marinid decline. According to Mediano, the Maghreb had gone through a considerable process of “bedouinisation,” caused by the Almohad reliance on inviting large Arab or Berber tribes to serve as mercenaries in the armies, which had a profound effect on the character of Marinid territorial rule. The Marinids ruled through the *iqtā’* system, which in essence comprised of several alliances between the Marinid *shaykh* and various Berber and Arab tribes, where the first gave rights to the latter to tax a particular territory in return for military aid or simply loyalty.³ This system, according to Mediano:

implied the creation of an oligarchy that was based on ethnicity and therefore retained a powerful centrifugal tendency. Yet this system clashed with the great developments taking place in the region, developments which implicated the states of not only North Africa but also the Iberian Peninsula and which explain the Marīnid attempts to expand their dominion. The internal contradictions of their system of rule meant that these attempts were ultimately bound to fail.⁴

The oligarchy as described by Mediano, derived its wealth through the “predatory exploitation of the sedentary population through taxes that were often outside Islamic law.”⁵ To keep the upper hand over the oligarchy, the Marinids relied on their income of gold, gained through the profitable gold-trade from West-Africa. It enabled the Marinids to limit the division of their territory, as lesser *shaykhs* and military leaders could be paid by gold for their services.⁶ Abun-Nasr likewise points to this system, claiming that Marinid direct rule essentially never spread any further beyond the capital of Fes, leaving their tribal allies to (mis)manage the wider

² Bernard Lugan, *Histoire du Maroc: Des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Critérium, 1992) 121.

³ Mediano, “The post-Almohad dynasties,” 120.

⁴ Mediano, 121.

⁵ Mediano, 120.

⁶ Mediano, 121.

Marinid domains. The Marinid state was thus, a “tribal state,” wherein a civil administrative structure was absent in the provinces and its governance was characterized by “the domination of the favored tribes over those that were not.”⁷

The “great developments taking place in the region” that Mediano refers to, were radical changes in the gold trade from West Africa. From the 9th century until the 15th century, the Maghreb was the only important link to the West African gold supply.⁸ However, a shift occurred somewhere during the second half of the 14th century. Following the formation of the Mali Empire, the eastern trade-routes running from West Africa to Tunis and to Egypt gained in importance at the expense of the more western-located routes, reducing the income of the Marinid sultans.⁹ According to both Abun-Nasr and Mediano, Abū ‘Inān Fāris’ and Abū al-Ḥassan’s attempts at conquering Algeria and Tunisia were primarily attempts to gain control over these trade routes.¹⁰ According to Mediano however, their ambitions to control and steer international trade routes clashed with the ambitions of the oligarchic tribal elites that the Marinid state relied upon. About to lose power and influence to an increasingly more centralized state, the oligarchy rebelled, undermining the plans of both rulers. The rebellion eventually even led to the disposal and death of Abū ‘Inān Fāris in 1358.¹¹

Lugan, Mediano and Abun-Nasr, all allude to the great dichotomy of Maghrebi history: the power of the centralized state versus the power of the tribe. According to Abun-Nasr, “Maghrebi history would be difficult, if not impossible, to explain if the tribes were not viewed as political units and tribalism as a form of political organization.¹² The origin of this dichotic framework lies outside of Western scholarship. It was the medieval historian Abū Zayd ‘Abd al-Raḥman Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), who first wrote of a dichotic relationship between the state and the tribes, called *‘aṣabiya*. This framework suggests that centralized states such as the Marinid Empire, sought to subdue and control the powerful tribal federations, who in turn sought to maintain their independence from the central state. When the centralized state became too weakened to maintain itself, it were the tribal federations that served as the basis of power for a new dynasty/state to destroy and replace the older state.¹³ The rise of the Marinid Empire from the ruins of the Almohad Empire can be seen as an example of this process.

⁷ Abun-Nasr, *A history of the Maghrib*, 115-116.

⁸ Abun-Nasr, 19.

⁹ Mediano, “The post-Almohad dynasties,” 123.

¹⁰ Abun-Nasr, *A history of the Maghrib*, 111-112; Mediano, “The post-Almohad dynasties,” 121-122.

¹¹ Mediano, “The post-Almohad dynasties,” 121-122.

¹² Abun-Nasr, *A history of the Maghrib*, 13.

¹³ Abun-Nasr, 14.

This dichotic view has been fiercely attacked within the works of the Canadian historian Maya Shatzmiller. According to Shatzmiller:

Anthropologists like to paint a picture of a weak Maghrebi Islamic state[.] [...] They propose a model of primitive and crude process of state formation, inspired by their observations of nomadic state building process in the Maghreb today. [...] The medieval chroniclers, in particular Ibn Khaldūn, have also contributed to the creation of the deficiency model by pointing to Islam as the only factor which could have held the Berbers together [...] Such reasoning inspired the disparaging views of the Maghrebi state, and distorted the historical evidence provided by Ibn Khaldūn[.]¹⁴

Shatzmiller's research rejected the dichotomy between tribe and state as the main explanatory framework for Maghrebi history. Instead, Shatzmiller showed, using Braudel's *longue durée* framework how long-term processes affected the Marinid period.¹⁵ According to Shatzmiller, The Marinids came to power during a period of prolonged demographic and economic growth in Morocco, giving them control over considerable economic resources. It enabled the Marinids to become an important force on the international stage. As an international power, the Marinids attempted to take control of the Mediterranean trade. Raising both armies and fleets, Marinid military expeditions were aimed at seizing control of resources and markets along the Atlantic Coast towards West Africa, Southern Spain and North Africa.¹⁶ While expanding their economic power, the Marinids simultaneously attempted to legitimize their rule through the building of an Islamic state. The Marinid dynasty oversaw the creation of strong social, economic and religious institutions that in many cases would outlast the dynasty itself.¹⁷ The most important of these new institutions was the *madrasa*, a religious school that focused on legal training and helped to create a religious-judicial elite that was directly financed by the Marinid state. This new elite served in creating an efficient court system that, along other administrative reforms, helped the Marinid state become an efficient centralized entity.¹⁸

¹⁴ Maya Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State: The Marīnid Experience in Pre-Protectorate Morocco* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000) xiv-xv.

¹⁵ Maya Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State*, xiv-xv.

¹⁶ Maya Shatzmiller, "Islam and the 'Great Divergence': The Case of the Moroccan Marīnid Empire, 1269-1465 CE," in *The Articulation of Power in Medieval Iberia and the Maghrib*, ed. Amira K. Bennison, 25-46 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 26-28.

¹⁷ Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State*, xiv-xv.

¹⁸ Shatzmiller, "Islam and the 'Great Divergence,'" 32-35.

Shatzmiller's appraisal of Maghrebi history and the Marinid state holds far more value than the dichotic theories of Lugan, Abun-Nasr and Mediano. Reducing the 200-year history of the Marinid dynasty and its state to an inefficient tribal government *in spite* of its influence on Northern Africa and the surrounding areas is a gross oversimplification. The Marinid architectural legacy still visible attests to this influence, not only in Fes, but also places like Meknes, Sijilmāsa and Salé in Morocco, Tlemcen in Algeria, and Gibraltar in Europe.

If Shatzmiller is right in her assessment of the strength of the Marinid state, then why did the state enter such a severe crisis following the death of Abū 'Inān Fāris? Although Shatzmiller does not directly answer this question, she, like Abun-Nasr and Mediano, points to the faltering gold trade. According to Shatzmiller, the decline of the gold trade was the result of climate change, which caused the Saharan oases to wither, and altered the trade routes. Additionally, the safety of these routes declined as the Marinid succession crisis from 1361 prevented the state from maintaining the security that existed before in the land.¹⁹ However, why this crisis had such a profound effect remains unclear.

It is notable how little attention the gold trade receives within the historiography. Despite the clear role that gold played in strengthening the Marinid state, setting its political agenda, and hastening its demise once its trade posts had shifted away from Morocco, the gold trade is only summarily mentioned in all the discussed works. Also, notably absent in the debate, is the Black Death. Although both Mediano and Shatzmiller mention how the disease directly caused the defeat of Abū al-Ḥassan's army at Kairouen in 1348, its wider effects are not taken into further consideration.²⁰

This is partially caused by the manner in which the history of this region has been approached. As noted by historian Amira K. Bennison, historical research was often "based solely on one political unit to the exclusion of its neighbours[.]"²¹ This was often simply the result of a lack of resources, or as Bennison puts it: "pressures on research and the linguistic skill required often oblige scholars to focus more narrowly than they consider ideal."²² But although Bennison, Shatzmiller and others have taken considerable efforts to remedy this,

¹⁹ Shatzmiller, "Islam and the 'Great Divergence,'" 42-43.

²⁰ Shatzmiller, 31; Mediano, "The post-Almohad dynasties," 114.

²¹ Amira K. Bennison, ed., "Introduction" in *the Articulation of Power in Medieval Iberia and the Maghrib* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 4.

²² Bennison, "Introduction," 4.

producing works that interlink the Maghreb with Islamic Spain, and the connection between the Maghreb and West Africa are still largely understudied.²³

And it is exactly within the connection between the Maghreb and West Africa, that the causes for the Marinid decline may be found. A new archaeological approach by Gérard Chouin and Christopher R. DeCorse suggests that the Black Death may have reached West Africa in the 14th century.²⁴ This opens up an entirely new perspective on the decline of the gold trade. Perhaps the decline was not caused by a political choice (the Mali Empire steering trade towards the East) or climate change, but by the devastating effects of the Black Death.

The Black Death, and its possible role within the Marinid decline following the death of Abū ‘Inān Fāris is the focus of this thesis. By doing so, it becomes possible to gain a better understanding of the effects of the Black Death on the wider region, and of the development of the Trans-Saharan trade routes. In particular, this thesis asks the following central question: **To what extent did the Black Death play a causative role in the decline of the Trans-Saharan gold trade?** In order to answer the central question, the following themes and chapters will be treated in this thesis:

In the first chapter, the Marinid Empire and its role in the medieval world will be described. Controlling the cross-road between the important gold-producing territories of the Mali Empire and the Mediterranean trade networks, the history of the Marinid Empire was for a large part shaped by their attempts to strengthen their control over the Trans-Saharan trade network and the wealth they were able to derive from these attempts. For this thesis, it will become clear that the fortunes of the Marinids were closely linked to developments taking place in both West Africa and Europe, which possibly played an important role in causing the Marinid decline. As it is beyond the scale of this thesis to describe everything in detail, this chapter focuses on the political economy of the Marinid Empire and their position within the wider medieval economic world system. The already referenced work by Maya Shatzmiller, and the work of archeologist Said Ennahid will be used to describe the political economy of

²³ It must be said here that there have been many studies on the Trans-Saharan trade itself. However, there is a clear chasm between studies oriented on these trade networks and studies on the states that depended on them, such as the Marinid Empire or the Mali Empire. This leads to the strange situation wherein it is generally accepted that both the Marinids and Mali relied on the gold trade, but no major research has been undertaken on how this interconnectivity affected these great medieval powers.

²⁴ Gérard Chouin and Christopher R. DeCorse, “Prelude to the Atlantic Trade: New Perspectives on Southern Ghana’s Pre-Atlantic History (800-1500),” *Journal of African History* 51 (2010):123-45.

the Marinid Empire.²⁵ For placing the Marinids within the larger medieval economic world system, this chapter primarily relies on the works of various economic historians.

The second chapter focuses on the spread of the Black Death. Emerging from the Central-Asian steppes, the Black Death was a catastrophic event that “devastated nations and caused populations to vanish.”²⁶ This chapter focuses on spread and effects of the disease throughout North Africa and the possible extension of the disease to West Africa. The theory of Gérard Chouin and Christopher R. DeCorse plays a central role in this chapter. For describing the Black death, I relied greatly on the excellent articles written by Monica H. Green in the first issue of the *Medieval Globe*.²⁷ For the spread of the Black Death, the most recent compendium on the Black Death by Ole J. Benedictow, and the history of the Black Death in the Middle East and North Africa by Michael W. Dols, were consulted.²⁸ Additionally, archaeological data from several authors will be used to further investigate the possible presence of the Black Death.²⁹

In the third chapter the crises following the death of Abū ‘Inān Fāris will be analyzed by looking at bullion data from Europe. By comparing fluctuations of gold bullion arriving to Europe to events taking place in North and West Africa, it becomes possible to shed a new light on the many crises that crippled the Marinid Empire in the late 14th and 15th century. It will be argued that the effects of the Black Death in West Africa greatly diminished the production and export of gold from West Africa, which doomed the Marinid state. This chapter also challenges the commonly held view that the Trans-Saharan trade simply shifted from the western Sahara routes dominated by the Marinids to eastern routes running via Tunisia and Egypt. This chapter greatly relies on the ‘great bullion famine’ theory forwarded by John Day.³⁰

²⁵ Said Ennahid, “Political Economy and Settlements Systems of Medieval Northern Morocco: An Archaeological-Historical Approach” (PhD dissertation, Arizona State University, 2001).

²⁶ Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* 1, trans. Franz Rosenthal (London: Routledge & Regan Paul LTD, 1967), 64.

²⁷ Monica H. Green, “Editor’s Introduction to Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death,” *The Medieval Globe* 1 (2014): 9-26; Monica H. Green, “Taking ‘Pandemic’ Seriously: Making the Black Death Global,” *The Medieval Globe* 1 (2014): 27-62.

²⁸ Ole J. Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346-1353: the Complete History* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004); Michael W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

²⁹ Sam Nixon “Excavating Essouk-Tadmakka (Mali): new archaeological investigations of early Islamic trans-Saharan trade,” *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 44 no. 2 (2009): 217-255; Eric Huysecom, Sylvain Ozainne et al., “Towards a Better Understanding of Sub-Saharan Settlement Mounds before AD 1400: The Tells of Sadia on the Seno Plain,” *Journal of African Archaeology* 13, no. 1 (2015): 7-38 and Roderick James McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998).

³⁰ John Day, “The Great Bullion Famine of the Fifteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 79, no. 1 (1978): 3-54.

Additionally, the observations made by Patricia Kozlik Kabra on the medieval economy of Hafsid Tunisia greatly influenced this chapter.³¹

One of the main objectives of this thesis is to place the decline of the Marinid Empire in a wider regional context. As a result, each chapter has its own regional focus, North Africa in chapter one, West Africa in chapter two, and Europe in chapter three. The decision to do so was, besides the experience described in the preface, informed by my understanding of *rhizome*, a philosophical concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.³² Opposite hierarchical structures, the *rhizome* is a structure that has no clear center or root, nor beginning or end. Arguing against a dichotomic world view, Deleuze and Guattari write: “Nature doesn't work that way: in nature, roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one.”³³ Instead of a clear hierarchy, “[a] rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.”³⁴ Although my thesis by no means follows the radical paths of a *rhizome*, the concept itself allowed me to place the Marinid decline within the contexts of both the history of the Black Death in West Africa and the history of bullion in medieval Europe. *Rhizome* transformed the Marinid Empire in my mind from a separate historical subject to an interconnected entity. It opened my eyes and enabled me to see connections between several historical subjects that I once viewed as totally separate. *Rhizome* also encouraged me to look beyond my own narrow interest in political history, and expand into other (sub)disciplines such as archaeology and economic history.

³¹ Patricia Kozlik Kabra, “Patterns of Economic Continuity and Change in Early Hafsid Ifriqiya,” (PhD dissertation, University of California, 1994)

³² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2003).

³³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 5.

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, 7.

Chapter 1: Empires of Gold



Image 2: North and West Africa in the Catalan Atlas (1387). *Source:* <http://www.bigmapblog.com/2011/cresques-catalan-atlas-world-map-1387/>

The Marinid Empire governed a territory that gave its rulers a unique position vis-à-vis their contemporaries. North Africa, within its wider regional context, served as a crossroad, standing in direct contact with several important medieval trade networks: the Mediterranean, the Middle East and West Africa. During the medieval period, West Africa served as the ‘Gold Motor’ for both Europe and the Middle East, being the primary supplier of gold for both regions.³⁵ The richness of the Mali Empire, the premier West African state during this period, was proverbial among both Arab and European writers. It was North Africa’s central location, that gave the Marinids their unique position. Before delving into the possible causes for the decline of the Marinid Empire, it is important to place the Marinid Empire in its wider political-economic and regional context.

The core of the Marinid Empire lay in what is now modern-day Morocco, historically known as the *Maghreb al-Aqsā* (lit. the Furthest-West) The Marinids started as a tribal federation located in North-West Algeria, and while seizing the opportunity created by the power vacuum that followed the Almohad disintegration from 1212 onwards, the Marinids expanded their influence over Northern Morocco.³⁶ The fertile lowlands of the Sebou Plain and Gharb, tucked in between the Rif Atlas to the North and the northernmost part of the Middle Atlas, would become the heartlands of the Marinid Empire.³⁷ The Sebou Plain and Gharb housed not only Fes, the Marinid capital, but also the city of Meknes, and the coastal entrepôts of Salé, Asilah, Anfā (Casablanca), and Tangier, which all became important Marinid centers. Furthermore, it gave them control over various other places such as the coastal town of Ceuta and the town of Tāzā (along with its silver mines), both located in the Rif Atlas region. Moving southwards from Fes, the Marinids crossed the Middle Atlas into the Tafilalt Oasis and the Draa Valley. Although these Sahara-bordering regions were relatively dry and barren when compared to the Mediterranean climate of the Sebou Plain and Gharb, their conquest by the Marinids sealed the fate of the Almohad Empire. With the conquest of the oasis town of Sijilmāsa in 1255, the Marinids gained control over the most important Trans-Saharan trade hub north of the Sahara, and thus control over the revenues from the gold trade. The Marinid

³⁵ Jan Bart Gewald, “Gold the True Motor of West African History: An Overview of the Importance of Gold in West Africa and its Relations with the Wider World,” *Rozenberg Quarterly* (2010), accessed June 6th, 2017, <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/gold-the-true-motor-of-west-african-history-an-overview-of-the-importance-of-gold-in-west-africa-and-its-relations-with-the-wider-world-2/>.

³⁶ *EI2*, s.v. “The Marīnids” by Maya Shatzmiller, accessed January 28, 2019.

³⁷ Alan B. Mountjoy and David Hilling, *Africa: Geography and Development* (London: Century Hutchinson Ltd, 1988),h 93.

conquest of Morocco was finalized by the conquest of the Almohad capital of Marrakech in 1269.³⁸

The Political Economy of the Marinid Empire

The political economy of the Marinid Empire was shaped by *longue durée* developments that characterized the medieval political economy of Morocco and North Africa in general. These developments are best described in the work of archaeologist prof. Said Ennahid. Ennahid was able to restructure the Marinid political system through a reading of various works from the Marinid era.³⁹ According to Ennahid, political economy can be defined as “the mechanism by which surplus is extracted in the form of tribute, taxes or labor to support state institutions administered by non-food producing personnel.”⁴⁰ During the medieval period, the political economic system of Morocco transformed from a primarily *staple finance* system, a system aimed at controlling the production and control of staple goods, into a primarily *wealth finance* system, a system where a kind of currency was used as the primary means of payment of taxes or tribute to a central authority.⁴¹ From the Almoravid period onwards (1062-1147), the control over the Trans-Saharan gold trade networks and the taxation of gold became the backbone of the Moroccan medieval political economy.⁴² An interesting feature of the political economy during this time was that none of the ruling dynasties made an attempt to control the sources of gold, but simply sought to assure that it could safely reach their domains.⁴³ Neither was there any attempt in getting involved in the trade business itself. The gold trade was primarily a private undertaking by the merchant class. The state busied itself with facilitating the trade and by taxing the merchants.⁴⁴

A description of the Marinid tax system during the reign of Abū al-Ḥassan’s father Abū Sa’īd Uthmān II (d. 1331) by al-‘Umarī gives us a good impression of the scale of the Marinid political economy. Describing the amount of *mithqāl* (4.25 grams of gold)⁴⁵ taxed per city on a yearly basis, al-‘Umarī gave the following list:

³⁸ *EI2*, “Marīnids.”

³⁹ The important ones being the Marinid chronicle *Rawḍ al-Qirtas*, written by Ibn Abī Zār (d. c. 1315) and the *Masālik al-Absār* by the Mamluk-Egyptian scholar al-‘Umarī (d. 1384).

⁴⁰ Ennahid, “Political Economy,” 67.

⁴¹ Ennahid, 68-69.

⁴² Ennahid, 70.

⁴³ Ennahid, 71.

⁴⁴ Ennahid, 89-90.

⁴⁵ Ennahid, 82.

| Table 1: Tax collected according to al-‘Umarī ⁴⁶ | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| Cities | Tax collected (in <i>mithqāl</i>) |
| Tijissās | 5.000 |
| Tīt | 5.000 |
| Ṣafrawi | 6.000 |
| Al-‘Arā’ish | 10.000 |
| Bādis | 10.000 |
| Azammūr | 20.000 |
| Qaṣr Ibn Abi Karīm | 20.000 |
| Aghmāt | 25.000 |
| Asafī | 25.000 |
| Tāzā | 30.000 |
| Tangier | 30.000 |
| Ghasāsā; al-Mazamma; Malīla | 30.000 |
| Anfā | 40.000 |
| Salé | 40.000 |
| Ceuta | 50.000 |
| Meknes | 60.000 |
| Fes | 150.000 |
| Marrakech | 150.000 |
| Sijilmāsa; Draa | 150.000 |

In total, the Marinids were able to collect 856.000 *mithqāl* on a yearly basis during the reign of Abū Sa’īd Uthmān II, which would be around 3638 kilo in gold.⁴⁷ According to al-‘Umarī’s informer, these numbers represented a fairly ‘normal’ year and excluded non-monetary taxes.⁴⁸ The proceedings of these taxes were stored in the *buyūt al-anwāl*, ‘houses of gold.’ They had their own distinct officials and formed a separate entity from the other imperial storage houses, the *khazā’in*.⁴⁹ There were many different taxes levied during the Marinid period. Besides a

⁴⁶ This list can be found, albeit in a different order, in Ibn Faḍl Allah al-‘Omarī, *Masālik el Abṣār fi Mamālik el Amsār I: L’Afrique, Moins L’Égypte*, trans. Gaudfroy-Demombynes (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1927), 171; the list is presented here as Ennahid presents it in his dissertation, see Ennahid, ‘Political Economy.’ 82.

⁴⁷ By today’s standards (a gram of gold cost around 40 euro in January 2019), the Marinids were able to acquire over 145 million euros worth of gold each year.

⁴⁸ Al-‘Omarī, *Masālik el Abṣār*, 171.

⁴⁹ Ennahid, ‘Political Economy,’ 78-79.

separation between taxes in kind and taxes in wealth (we are primarily discussing the latter here), there existed a clear difference between taxes informed by Islamic law and non-Islamic taxes created by rulers to generate extra income. The latter were often deemed “illegal” by Islamic scholars, and al-‘Umarī noted that many taxes levied by Abū Sa’īd Uthmān were of such nature. Many of these taxes were abolished during the reign of Abū al-Ḥassan, however. Although Abū al-Ḥassan abolished many of these taxes, God rewarded Abū al-Ḥassan for his justice by doubling the income of his country, according to al-‘Umarī’s informer. Al-‘Umarī’s informer was unable to say where this newfound wealth came from, however.⁵⁰ Whatever increased Abū al-Ḥassan’s wealth, it is clear that the Marinids were still wealthy during Abū al-Ḥassan’s reign.

The large quantities of gold enabled the Marinids to build a powerful state. An important aspect of having so much gold was that the Marinid state, unlike many other contemporary states, rarely had to lend out land as a means of payment (the practice is called *iqṭā’* in Arabic, from the verb *qata’* meaning ‘to break up, to divide’). This meant that there was no chance for the development of the class of so-called “military absentee landlords,” who were common in other parts of the Islamic world and often had a disastrous and ruinous influence over the lands they governed. Perhaps consequentially, the Marinids uniquely faced no rural rebellions that were so common in other contemporary polities.⁵¹ Instead, the Marinids used their large supply of gold to build a professional mercenary force. Shatzmiller, citing al-‘Umarī, gives an overview of the army during Abū Sa’īd Uthmān’s day:

Many Arab tribes, 1500 *Ghuz* arrow-shooting cavalry of Turkish origin, 4000 [Christian] Frankish cavalry, 500 *‘Ulūj* Muslim cavalry, more than 1000 Andalūsī arabaletiers [m. crossbow-men] [...] and a large group of Berber tent dwellers.⁵²

The overview shows how Marinid gold, world-famous for its quality, lured professional soldiers from distant regions. The Marinids made good use of these forces, both at home and abroad. Telling of the state’s powerful sway over its army was its ability to dismiss and rent out elements of it to other states, which they often did.⁵³ When the Marinids did make a payment through the *iqṭā’* system, it often was the case that they kept the privilege of collecting

⁵⁰ Al-‘Umarī, *Masālik el Abṣār*, 170.

⁵¹ Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State*, 125-127.

⁵² Al-‘Umarī in Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State*, 127.

⁵³ Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State*, 127-128.

the taxes for themselves.⁵⁴ Besides the army, the state's wealth gave it the capability of maintaining a military fleet, a costly endeavor that required long-term funding and was an essential condition for the Marinid's presence in Iberia.⁵⁵ In Iberia, the Marinids also supported a military force of volunteers. These forces played a pivotal role in the defense of Granada, the last Iberian Islamic kingdom, and were led by a member of the Marinid family.⁵⁶

The revenue from the gold trade also enabled the Marinid state to build a state apparatus that would have a long-lasting legacy. The Marinid founding of the madrasa institute was not only an act of creating a reliable institute of learning, but was also a political move to gain control over the Islamic clergy, a powerful force within Islamic society.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the Marinid control over the Moroccan clergy and their creation of a Maliki court system greatly improved the legal situation in Morocco, creating places where social conflicts could be settled in a fair and reliable system. The thousands of conserved fatwas (an Islamic legal advice given by a *muftī*) from the Marinid period in the work of Al-Wansharīsī attest to the functioning of this system.⁵⁸

One of the fatwas from al-Wansharīsī's corpus, studied and described by David S. Power, sheds a fascinating light on how the Marinid's gold supplies enabled them to hold sway over their disloyal subjects. In the fatwa, the question of whether an illegally fathered son had right to a part of his deceased father's inheritance stood central. The inheritance primarily consisted of a pension provided by the Marinid state. This pension was part of an elaborate penal structure, and was granted to the father after his participation in a failed revolt against Marinid rule. After the Marinids had crushed the revolution, they, among other punishments, seized the family's holdings. The family was still allowed a share of the revenue from those holdings through a pension granted from the state treasury. A family that was apparently too important to simply move aside, the control over the family's finances was a sure way of keeping the family loyal from then onwards.⁵⁹ The ability to pay out pensions such as these were one of the many boons of the large quantities of gold in the hands of the state.

⁵⁴ Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State*, 126.

⁵⁵ An overview of the Marinid navy can be found in Ezad Azraai Jamsari and Mohamed Zulfazdlee Abul Hassan Ashari, "The Marinid Naval Force According to Historical Perspective," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 29 (2014): 26-32.

⁵⁶ L. P. Harvey, *Islamic Spain, 1250 to 1500* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 153.

⁵⁷ Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State*, 91-92.

⁵⁸ Shatzmiller, "Islam and 'the Great Divergence,'" 33.

⁵⁹ David S. Power, *Law, Society & Culture in the Maghreb, 1300-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23-27.

The Marinids spend their gold on many other institutions beside the madrasas. For example, on the building and maintaining hospitals, hotels, Sufi lodgings among others.⁶⁰ With their extensive building projects, the Marinids changed the face of many major cities throughout the wider Maghreb, and even helped found new ones, such as Tetouan in Morocco. The Marinid complex at Chellah, Rabat, often called the ‘Marinid Necropolis,’ is a good example of Marinid architecture. Much more than a necropolis, Marinid construction begun during the reign of Abū Yūsuf (d. 1284), who expanded the pre-existing mosque and was interred there with his wife after his death. Over the next 80 years, rulers kept building and expanding the complex, leading it to have a madrasa alongside a bathhouse and surrounded the complex with an impressive wall.⁶¹ Importantly, although Chellah today is a mixed Roman/Marinid ruin, it was still an inhabited city in the times of the Marinids.⁶² The complex was not just a necropolis, but a socio-economic-religious center, the infrastructure of which supported a Marinid-ruled town.

Supported with Marinid funding, the Marinid-ruled cities and towns prospered and grew. The capital city of Fes gives us an impression of the scale of the Marinid economy. Fes was already an important city before the Marinids conquered it but grew considerably larger after it became the new capital. During the rule of Abū Yūsuf, Fes was expanded with an entire new district, *Fes al-Jadīd*, ‘New Fes.’ The historian Simon M. O’Meara argued that the city had close to 100.000 inhabitants by looking at the physical size of medieval Fes. Based on the use of space, (est. number of houses, gardens etc.) in the old medina, O’Meara came up with a number of 80.000 people, or 380 inhabitants per square hectare. His calculations do not include Fes al-Jadīd, however, which with its Jewish quarter and the imperial palace must have housed a considerable number of people as well.⁶³ A tax ledger from the Almohad period sheds a light on what the capital produced. As given by Shatzmiller, the ledger counted:

785 mosques, 93 public bathing houses, 80 fountains, 17040 large dwelling units, 472 mills, 89.236 houses, 467 inns, 9082 shops, 2 *qaysariyas* [bazaars, specialized market districts], 2 minting houses, 1170 ovens, 3490 looms, 47 soap making shops, 86

⁶⁰ Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State*, 98.

⁶¹ Péter Tamás Nagy, “Sultans’ Paradise: The Royal Necropolis of Shāla, Rabat,” *Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean* (2014): 132-146.

⁶² Nagy, “Sultans’ Paradise,” 137.

⁶³ Simon M. O’Meara, “An Architectural Investigation of Marinid and Waṭṭasid Fes Medina (674-961/1276-1554), in terms of Gender, Legend and Law,” (PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, 2004) 29-30.

tanneries, 116 dye houses, 12 copper foundries, 11 crystal manufacturing stores and 118 potteries.⁶⁴

Many of the industries mentioned here played a role in the Trans-Saharan trade. Textiles, wool, leather, pottery, glass, items of copper and brass were among the items taken across the Sahara by caravans.⁶⁵ As the population grew, so did the manufacturing of goods, allowing for more goods to be transported across the Sahara. The Marinid gold, invested in their cities, strengthened these developments.⁶⁶

The development of the madrasas and various socio-economic-religious centers not only aided the Marinids in creating a centralized state and the development of a stronger economy, but also legitimized their rule as a pious Islamic government. As Shatzmiller convincingly argues, the Marinids consciously attempted to “build an Islamic state, inspired by Islamic norms, run by experienced Muslims.”⁶⁷ Abū al-Ḥassan in particular was well-remembered as a pious ruler. A plaque found in the al-Obbad mosque, in Tlemcen, Algeria, commemorating the founding of the mosque and an attached madrasa through an endowment by Abū al-Ḥassan, gives us a good impression of how he presented himself:

[The Mosque and Madrasa was built with the aid of] our lord, the Righteous Sultan (*al-Sulṭān al-‘Adil*), Leader of the Muslims (*Amīr al-Muslimīn*), Warrior in the cause of the Lord of the Worlds (*Mujāhid fī sabīl Rub al-‘ālimīn*) Abū al-Ḥassan, son of our lord, Leader of the Muslims, Warrior in the cause of the Lord of the Worlds, Abī Sa’īd.⁶⁸

Abū al-Ḥassan separated himself from the previous rulers by adding “the righteous” to his name, and proved he earned the adjective by abolishing taxes deemed un-Islamic, and by constructing many new madrasas, mosques and other buildings throughout the realm. However, the examples above show that the development of an Islamic state ran as a thread through the history of the Marinid Empire, and Abū al-Ḥassan reign certainly was not the first ruler who patronized various religious institutions.

⁶⁴ Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State*, 130.

⁶⁵ Said Ennahid, “States, Trade, and Ethnicities in the Maghreb,” in *The Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology*, ed. Peter Mitchell and Paul J. Lane (2013), 9, accessed on 04-04-2018: DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199569885.013.0056.

⁶⁶ Shatzmiller, “Islam and the ‘Great Divergence,’”

⁶⁷ Shatzmiller, *Berbers*, xv.

⁶⁸ Muḥammed bin Ḥamū, “Waqfiya Abī al-Ḥassan al-Marīnī bi-Tlamsān,” *Abgadiyat* 7, no. 1 (2012): 153.

The Marinids cultivated their image as pious Muslim rulers not only within their own territory, but likewise abroad. Abū al-Ḥassan personally copied several Qurʾān's which were sent to the holy cities of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, where he established various *waqf's* (religious endowments) to pay for professional reciters to cite from the copies and to pay for the maintenance of the work.⁶⁹ These Qurʾān's were generally of a stunning quality, and copious amounts of gold leaf was used to embellish the manuscripts.⁷⁰

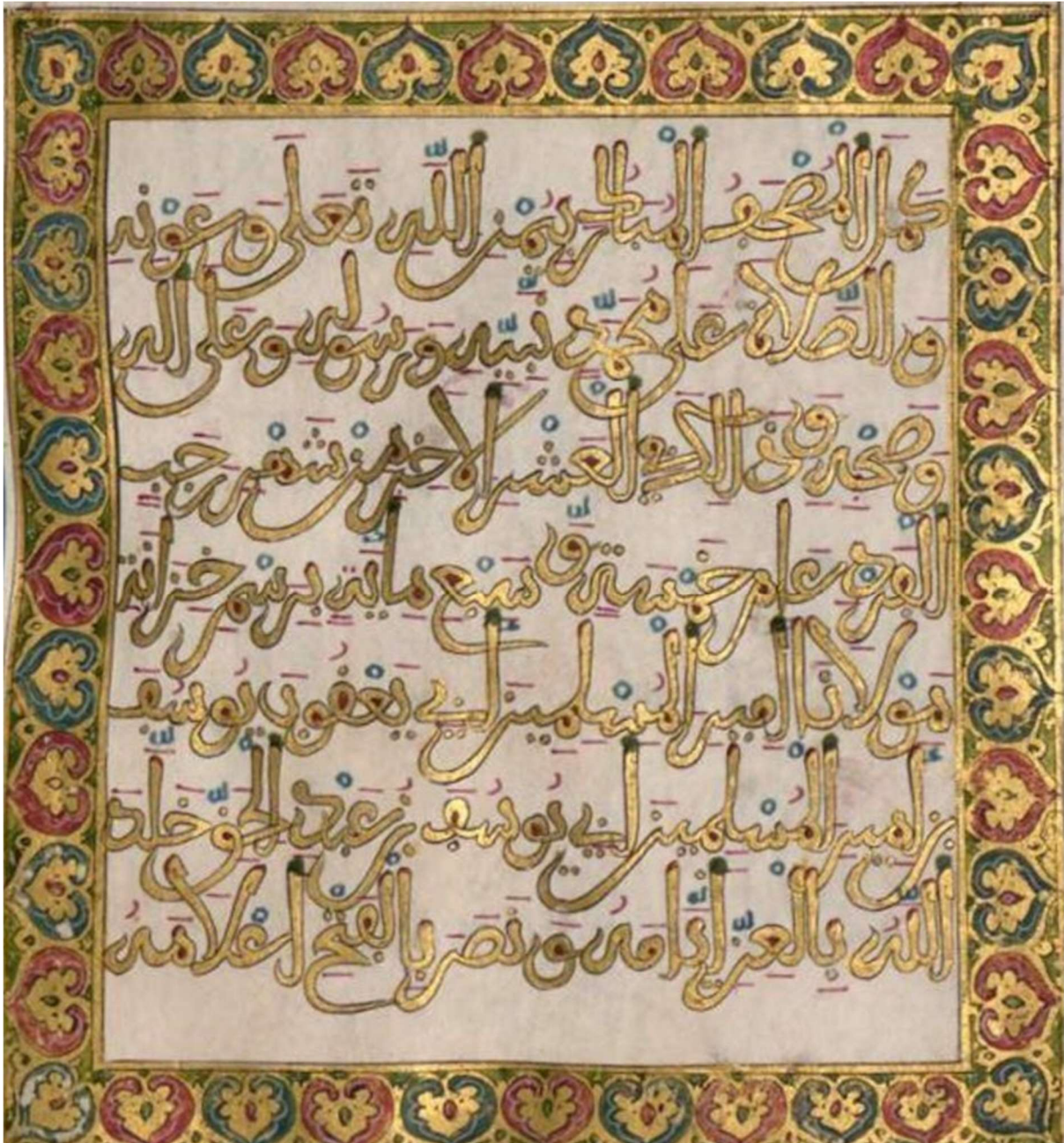


Image 3: Qur'an once owned by Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf. Source:

<https://ballandalus.wordpress.com/2019/01/27/quran-of-marinid-sultan-abu-yaqub-yusuf-r-1286-1307/>

⁶⁹ Shatzmiller, *Berbers*, 103

⁷⁰ See image 3.

The Marinid Empire and the Medieval Economic World System

The examples given above are by no means a complete overview of the Marinid political economy, but they help understand how centrally important the gold from West Africa was for the Marinid Empire. The Marinids themselves clearly understood this, and they aimed their policies of expansion at gaining control over the major trade hubs in the region.⁷¹ These hubs were then further developed with the aid of Marinid gold. This did not only include production centers such as Fes and Trans-Saharan hubs such as Sijilmāsa, but likewise coastal trade entrepôts such as Tangier and Ceuta that connected the Sub-Saharan networks to the European and Middle Eastern routes. Although gold was the most important trade good, other important trade goods from West Africa included: slaves, ivory, spices, indigo, ebony and Arabic gum.⁷²

The story of the Marinid wealth fits within a wider story of international economic patterns. As mentioned above, West Africa served as the ‘Gold Motor’ for the medieval world economy. An estimated two-thirds of all the available gold during this period, came from West Africa.⁷³ Much of the gold that arrived in the Marinid territory, was further drawn to both Europe and the Mashrīq, the East.⁷⁴ The primary dynamic behind these movements, was a dual bullion famine that shaped the economic patterns of the medieval Mediterranean. Europe, lacking any natural sources for gold, but relatively rich in silver mines, suffered from a gold famine throughout much of the high medieval period (1000-1300). The societies of the Middle East on the other hand, suffered from a drastic silver famine, but had relatively large quantities of gold.⁷⁵ Consequentially, gold won in West Africa was drawn to Europe, whereas European silver was pulled towards both the Maghreb and the Mashrīq, as merchants could earn huge profits by moving silver or gold from one region to the other.

The profit was gained on the basis that the value of gold or silver was relative to its scarcity. In West Africa, where gold was abundant, it could be acquired cheaply. Al-‘Umarī reported how Arab and Berber merchants were able to exchange a pile of salt for an equally large pile of gold in West Africa, a 1:1 rate of exchange.⁷⁶ The same rate applied to silver.⁷⁷ Once in the Marinid domain, this cheaply acquired gold could be exchanged with European

⁷¹ Mediano, “the post-Almohad dynasties,” 122.

⁷² Ennahid, “Political Economy,” 85-87.

⁷³ Andrew M. Watson, “Back to Gold-and Silver,” *The New Economic History Review* 20, no. 1 (1967): 31.

⁷⁴ The East meaning the heart of the Arab world e.g. Egypt, Syria, Iraq etc.

⁷⁵ Watson, “Back to Gold-and Silver,” 1.

⁷⁶ Al-‘Umarī, *Masālik el Abṣār*, 83.

⁷⁷ Watson, “Back to Gold-and Silver,” 28.

merchants, who paid sometimes with grain, but more often with the much sought silver bullion. Gold was still cheap. Although we lack the data to reveal long-term price fluctuations, data from 11th century Tunis showed that gold could be exchanged for silver at about a 6.5:1 rate.⁷⁸ Once taken to Europe, the further the gold went, the more expensive it became in relation to silver. This was due to the increasing scarcity of the gold, but also due to the increasing abundance of silver. Gold was thus relatively cheaper in countries such as Portugal, Castile or the trading republic of Genoa, but more expensive in more northern countries such as England or the Holy Roman Empire.⁷⁹ There were of course many other factors at play that determined the relative value of silver and gold but the dual bullion famine formed the basic principle behind the movement of silver and gold.

An additional factor that is essential for understanding the Marinid position, is the trade imbalance European states suffered with the Mashrīq. Being a relative backwater region, European merchants traveled towards the Eastern world in search for both luxury goods and raw materials. Silks, spices, cotton, alum and many more goods could only be acquired on the Middle Eastern markets.⁸⁰ For most of the medieval period, the Arab world was both larger in scale and more developed in terms of trade, industry and technology when compared to Europe. Consequentially, European merchants found that many of their goods simply did not sell well on the Middle Eastern markets. Unable to export any product or resource in large enough quantities, European merchants were forced to bring large stocks of both silver and gold to buy the goods they wanted on the Middle Eastern markets.⁸¹ Silver was especially in demand on the Eastern markets, as silver was transported by merchants even further east to the large economic regions of India and China.⁸²

With the enormous outflow of silver, and the relatively large influx of West African gold, European states eventually started to mint gold coins instead of silver coins as their basic currency. Genoa was one of the largest importers of West African gold (primarily through the port of Ceuta) and switched from primarily minting silver coins to gold coins in 1252. Florence followed suit in the same year.⁸³ In the next few decades, other European states would follow suit as well.⁸⁴ The gold trade, thus, had a profound effect on the economies of the entire

⁷⁸ Watson, "Back to Gold-and Silver," 27.

⁷⁹ Watson, 21-22.

⁸⁰ John Day, "The Great Bullion Famine," 6.

⁸¹ Peter Spufford, *Money and its use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 145-146, 157.

⁸² Spufford, *Money*, 156.

⁸³ Spufford, 176.

⁸⁴ Spufford, 267.

European continent. The dozens of mints throughout Southern Europe that were striking silver coins imitating those of North Africa are a good illustration of just how important this trade was. The trust North African traders had in these coins was apparently so great that it was worthwhile for a Christian merchant to change his silver ingots into North African-styled coins before transporting it to North Africa. In an angry letter written in 1266, from Pope Clement IV to Berengar, the Aragonese bishop of Maguelonne, the pope complained of Berengar's minting of coins with scandalous Islamic phrases such as "*lā ilāh illā Allah*" (there is no god but God) and "*Muḥammed Rasūlullah*" (Muhammed is the Messenger of God). Scandals like these did not stop the practice, however, there simply was too much money to be made.⁸⁵

The Marinids themselves also played a role in the export of gold bullion. I already mentioned their practices of creating *waqf's* beyond their own borders, which were almost certainly paid for with gold. Gold was also moved to Europe through the payment of Christian mercenaries that served in the Marinid army. The Marinids would sometimes directly hire these forces from other states. In 1274, an agreement between Jacques II of Aragon and Sultan Abū Yūsuf allowed for the recruitment of both Aragonese soldiers and ships. In return, the Marinids paid large sums of gold to the Aragonese king.⁸⁶

By controlling the Trans-Saharan trade routes, the Marinids played an important role in the economy of the medieval world. As such, we stand to gain much by placing the Marinid Empire and its history in a wider perspective. The Maghreb is often seen as a peripheral region, of either Spain or the Middle East, and although this is defensible from an early modern and modern perspective, it certainly skews our perspective of the Maghreb in the medieval world. If we should view the Maghreb as the periphery of anything during this time period, it would be as the periphery of West Africa.

The Marinid Empire and the Mali Empire

Although the Mali Empire and West Africa in general were viewed as an unimportant part of the medieval world, this view has shifted in recent years.⁸⁷ Noting the cultural importance of

⁸⁵ Spufford, *Money*, 173-174.

⁸⁶ Shatzmiller, *Berbers*, 127.

⁸⁷ The idea that West Africa was more or less an isolated region during the medieval can be best seen in the otherwise brilliant work of Janet L. Abu-Lughod; in her proposed eight circuits that connected the medieval world, West Africa, alongside most of North Africa and Iberia, is notably excluded; she remarked that "Africa's geographic reach was relatively limited. African merchants were largely local and African goods seldom made

African ivory and spices for medieval European societies, historian Sarah M. Guérin pointed to this fact illustrating the central role West Africa played in the medieval world system.⁸⁸ The Mali Empire, by controlling the gold mines that supplied much of the medieval world with gold, affected the medieval world in many ways. When the famous Malian ruler Mansa Musa, traveled with his entourage to Mecca via Egypt, he carried so much gold with him that the value of Egypt's golden dinars plummeted.⁸⁹ But more important is the fact that the Mali Empire controlled a vast West African trade network that was integrally connected to the other networks of the world. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa commented on the safety he felt while traveling through the Mali Empire in 1351-52:

And of their [the people of Mali] good doings (...) is the enveloped security of their country and so, traveler nor resident fears neither thief nor usurper.⁹⁰

By controlling and safeguarding the West African trade network, the Mali Empire, like the Marinid Empire, enriched itself.⁹¹

Although we do not know why Ibn Baṭṭūṭa went to West Africa, it has been suggested that his journey was a diplomatic Marinid mission to the Malian court.⁹² There were indeed diplomatic contacts between several Marinid and Malian sultans in the 14th century. These contacts were chronicled by Ibn Khaldūn. Ibn Khaldūn noted that these contacts started during the reign of Abū al-Ḥassan:

There were delegations [*muwāsala*] and exchanges of gifts between this Sultan Mansā Mūsā and the ruler of the Maghreb, his contemporary, from the Banū Marīn, Sultan Abū al-Ḥassan. Experienced men from both countries traveled between the two rulers. And the Lord of the Maghreb spoke well of the goods of his [Musa's] country and of the gifts from his kingdoms.⁹³

their way to China or Europe[,]" in Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1989), 35, 36.

⁸⁸ Sarah M. Guérin, "Exchange of Sacrifices: West Africa in the Medieval World of Goods," *The Medieval Globe* 3, no. 2 (2017): 98.

⁸⁹ Nehemia Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 1973), 212.

⁹⁰ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *al-Riḥla*, 265

⁹¹ The origins and development of these West African trade networks, as well as the rise of the political elite that would later come to dominate the Mali Empire are best described in George E. Brooks, *Landlords & Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa: 1000-1600* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

⁹² See the comments of Richard van Leeuwen in Ibn Battouta, *De Reis* (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 2015) 325-326.

⁹³ Abū Zayd 'Abd al-Raḥman Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh al-'Allāma* 6 (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1968), 416.

In another passage, Ibn Khaldūn makes it clear that communications were frequent enough for Mansa Musa to closely follow the progress of Abū al-Ḥassan’s military campaigns. After Abū al-Ḥassan conquered Tlemcen and established his control over what is now Algeria, Mansa Musa dispatched two emissaries to Abū al-Ḥassan to congratulate him with his successes.⁹⁴ Abū al-Ḥassan courteously send a delegation with gifts in return.⁹⁵ When Abū al-Ḥassan later on suffered his crushing defeat in 1348, a Malian delegation was there to witness it.⁹⁶ After Abū al-Ḥassan’s death in 1351, a memorial service was held for him in the Malian court, which was witnessed by Ibn Baṭṭūta.⁹⁷

The last known delegation from the Mali Empire to the Marinid court is one of the more famous episodes of Malian history. Visiting in 1360, the Marinid sultan Abū Sālim was presented with a bizarre gift: A “strangely shaped gigantic animal, uncommon to the Maghreb.” The animal was so bizarre and awesome that “the people who saw it and its features talked on and on about its scattered spots and the long features of its body.”⁹⁸ The animal was a giraffe, and had not been seen in North Africa for quite some time.

How should the diplomatic exchanges between the Marinids and Mali be interpreted? Mediano suggests that the contacts were a result of Marinid desperation, as the Sultans of Mali had “a desire [...] to diversify their gold markets,” and were pulling the trade routes further east, away from Sijilmāsa.⁹⁹ But as shown above, this is probably not true. Perhaps the most important takeaway from these contacts is the relative closeness between these realms. Although we are used to treat North and West Africa as two different worlds, it is clear that its inhabitants did not see it that way, or at least not during the golden days of the Marinid Empire. When Ibn Baṭṭūta was still in the Mali Empire in 1352, he was eventually found by a representative of Abū ‘Inān Fāris, who ordered Ibn Baṭṭūta to return.¹⁰⁰ The fact that a Marinid messenger could be send across the Sahara to locate and return one of his Sultan’s subjects is something to think about.

This chapter attempted to present the Marinids within a wider economic and historical perspective. Their empire was a well-organized state, fueled by the enormous influx of gold coming from West Africa. The large quantities of gold enabled the Marinids to build an

⁹⁴ Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh* 7, 554.

⁹⁵ Ibn Khaldūn, 554-555.

⁹⁶ Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, 215-216.

⁹⁷ Ibn Baṭṭūta, *Riḥla*, 397.

⁹⁸ Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh* 6, 417.

⁹⁹ Mediano, “the post-Almohad dynasties,” 122-123.

¹⁰⁰ Ibn Baṭṭūta, *Riḥla*, 406-407.

impressive state-apparatus, and made them a formidable force within the region. By controlling the most important Trans-Saharan trade routes the Marinids played an important part in the medieval world economy, as the Marinids facilitated and profited from the large movements of gold bullion from West Africa to Europe and beyond. When Abū al-Ḥassan's forces conquered Tunisia in 1347, there were no signs that this system was under stress in any way. His defeat there a year later however, proved to be the starting point of the Marinid decline. But it still a question to what extent the military defeat itself was causal to the decline. For Abū Ḥassan's defeat coincided with the arrival of a disease that would change the face of the medieval world: the Black Death.

Chapter 2: The Army of God: The Black Death and West Africa.

Civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out. It overtook the dynasties at the time of their senility, when they had reached the limit of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed. The East, it seems, was similarly visited, though in accordance with and in proportion to [the East's more affluent] civilization. It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world responded to its call. God inherits the earth and whomever is upon it.¹⁰¹

- Ibn Khaldūn -

Did the Black Death spread to West Africa? The pandemic outbreak of the plague that swept over large parts of Asia, Europe and the Middle East in the 14th century was, without a doubt, one of the most catastrophic events in pre-modern history. Within a timespan of just a few years, an estimated 40% to 60% of the population had died.¹⁰² Research on the disease has primarily been focused on Europe, where evidence of the disease and its effects are more abundant than elsewhere. In the Middle East, evidence of the plague has been primarily anecdotal, although recent studies suggest that the death toll there was at least as high as in Europe.¹⁰³ For a long time there seemingly existed no evidence for the spread of the disease in West Africa and Sub Saharan Africa in general.¹⁰⁴ However, recent archaeological data gathered by archaeologists Gérard Chouin and Christopher R. DeCorse have led them to suggest that the plague very well may have reached the West African sub-continent. Before delving into their arguments it is useful to question what the Black Death precisely was, and how it came to North Africa.

¹⁰¹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, 64.

¹⁰² Monica H. Green, "Editor's Introduction to Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death," *The Medieval Globe* 1 (2014): 9.

¹⁰³ See for example the work of Stuart Borsch, "Plague Depopulation and Irrigation Decay in Medieval Egypt," *The Medieval Globe* 1 (2014): 125-156.

¹⁰⁴ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 67.

The term ‘Black Death,’ now commonly used to denote the pandemic, became popular only centuries after the disease had struck. In Europe, the disease was generally referred to by physicians as *pestis* or *pestilential*, Latin for ‘epidemic.’ Another word taken from Latin was *plaga*, meaning a ‘stroke’ or ‘blow,’ that survives into modern English as ‘plague.’¹⁰⁵ In Arabic, the similar term *tā’ūn*, with its meaning of ‘to strike,’ was used to label the disease, whereas *wabā`* could be translated as ‘epidemic.’¹⁰⁶

Thanks to advances in microbiological research, it has become more than certain that the 14th century pandemic was caused by the *Yersinia Pestis* bacteria. *Y. Pestis* could be transferred by several means. It could be transferred through the bite of an insect (bubonic), it could be inhaled (pneumonic), it could infect an open wound or cut (septicemic), or, as only recently has been discovered, it could spread through the eating of infected meat (gastrointestinal).¹⁰⁷ As historian Monica H. Green notes:

the new microbiology matters not simply because it solves the question “What was the disease?,” but because in solving that question [...] it opens up entirely new questions, ones we did not previously know we needed to ask.¹⁰⁸

A question that is raised by knowing *what* the disease precisely was, is the question of how and where the plague was able to spread. For starters, it enabled microbiologists to pinpoint the original source of *Y. Pestis* to the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau in Western China¹⁰⁹ For *Y. Pestis* to be able to move from the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau, which lies at an altitude of several thousand meters above sea-level, to the regions where it would cause so much damage, it had to travel across many different climates and species of animals. This contradicts the common notion that the plague was primarily spread through the fleas carried by the rat, and therefore could not spread to extremely cold or warm regions such as Scandinavia or the Sahara due to the natural habitat of the rat.¹¹⁰ *Y. pestis* did not only spread through animals that lived around human settlements, such as the rat, but likewise through dozens of species that lived far and remote from human settlements.¹¹¹ The most important conclusion to draw in relation to researching

¹⁰⁵ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Dols, *The Black Death*, 315.

¹⁰⁷ Monica H. Green, “Taking ‘Pandemic’ Seriously,” 32.

¹⁰⁸ Monica H. Green, 29.

¹⁰⁹ Monica H. Green, 29-30.

¹¹⁰ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 13, 22-24.

¹¹¹ Monica H. Green, “Taking ‘Pandemic’ Seriously,” 32-33.

the possible spread of the plague to West Africa, is that it was possible for *Y. Pestis* to cross the Sahara. Camels are plague carriers, and can infect humans when they are slaughtered and eaten. Furthermore, various species of rodents that are found living from Mongolia to North Africa and can be found around the tents of nomads, are carriers of the plague.¹¹² The plague could thus theoretically be carried to West Africa through the Trans-Saharan trade networks.¹¹³

The Black Death and the Marinid Empire

As noted by Benedictow, trade networks played a critical role in the spread of the plague throughout the Afro-Eurasian world. Trading ships dramatically sped up the spread of the disease. The year 1347, when the disease reached the Genoese trading port in the Crimea, was the same year the disease first appeared in several major trading ports throughout the Mediterranean. Constantinople, Genoa, Pisa, Alexandria and many other ports were all struck in the same year.¹¹⁴ From these ports, the disease moved at a slower pace over land. From Alexandria, the plague took nearly a year to reach the city of Gaza in Palestine, where the most lethal outbreak took place in April and May of 1348. West of Alexandria the plague reached the city of al-Marj in modern day Eastern Libya around the same time it reached Gaza. Tunis was also struck that April, its quick contamination facilitated by the Mediterranean merchant shipping. It had spread not from Alexandria, but from Sicily, probably by a ship carrying grain.¹¹⁵

The arrival of the Black Death in Tunisia had a disastrous effect on the military campaign of Abū al-Ḥassan, who was defeated at the battle of Kairouan the same month the disease arrived in Tunis. As Ibn Khaldūn dryly noted: “violent plague occurred and it settled the affair.”¹¹⁶ A great deal of notables that accompanied Abū al-Ḥassan, including his secretary, his physician and the *qāḍī* of his army, were all killed by the plague.¹¹⁷ Ibn Khaldūn, who was still a teenager living in Tunis, lost many of his teachers and both his parents to the plague.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Monica H. Green, “Taking ‘Pandemic’ Seriously,” 33-34.

¹¹³ It would theoretically also have been possible for the plague to have traveled via the Indian Ocean route through the Sahel or Central Africa; see Monica H. Green “Putting Africa on the Black Death Map: Narratives from Genetics and History,” *Afriques* 9 (December 2018): <https://journals.openedition.org/afriques/2125>.

¹¹⁴ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, map 1, after xvi.

¹¹⁵ Benedictow, *The Black Death*, 63-65.

¹¹⁶ Dols, *The Black Death*, 64.

¹¹⁷ Dols, 64.

¹¹⁸ Dols, 65.

Abū al-Ḥassan’s army seemingly carried the plague to Tlemcen, Algeria, where the plague took another of his advisors in the same year. From there on, it becomes less clear how the plague further spread through the Maghreb. We do know that it eventually did. Like Ibn Khaldūn, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa lost his mother to “the epidemic” (his father had died many years earlier), who lived in the village of Tāza close to Fes.¹¹⁹ He received this news somewhere around 1349.¹²⁰ A year later Ibn Baṭṭūṭa himself had another encounter with the Black Death (he was in Damascus when the plague broke out there in 1348). Having heard that the Castilian king Alfonso XI was besieging the Marinid fortress-town of Gibraltar, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa joined a party of volunteers traveling to Gibraltar to relieve the city.¹²¹ The Black Death however, having first emerged on the Eastern shores of Iberia in 1348, had slowly made its way westwards and struck both the besieged city and the besieging army in 1350. On the 26th of march, Alfonso XI died, and his ravaged army abandoned the siege.¹²²

After touring through Andalucía, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa returned to Morocco, where he traveled to Marrakech to visit the city. He encountered a city that, despite its beauty, had been reduced to a ghost town:

I traveled from Salé and I arrived in the city of Marrakech. It [Marrakech] is one of the most beautiful cities, spacious (*fasīḥa al-arjā`*) and wide (*mutsi`a al-aqṭār*), and bountiful of good things. [Marrakech] has enormous mosques, the largest of which is the *Kutubīyīn*.¹²³ [Marrakech] also has an enormous awesome tower (*ṣawma`*), which I ascended and allowed me to see all of the region around her.¹²⁴ However, desolation (*al-khirāb*) has seized the region, and the city is similar to Baghdad, except that the markets are better in Baghdad. And in Marrakech is an enormous *madrassa* which is distinguished by its good condition and its masterful construction (*itqān al-ṣuna`a*).¹²⁵ The *madrassa* is one of the buildings build by the imam, our lord, *Amīr al-Muslīmīn*, Abī al-Ḥassan, God’s satisfaction is upon him.¹²⁶

¹¹⁹ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihla*, 382.

¹²⁰ Dols, *The Black Death*, 65.

¹²¹ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihla*, 386.

¹²² Dols, *The Black Death*, 66.

¹²³ Written here as *Al-Kunubīyīn*, this building still exists and is one of the main tourist attractions of Marrakech.

¹²⁴ This is the world-famous minaret of the mosque.

¹²⁵ This is likewise a building one can still visit today, albeit in altered form. It is the Ben Youssef Madrasa.

¹²⁶ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihla*, 391.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's comparison with Baghdad is striking. Baghdad, once the splendid capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, had been destroyed by the Mongols in 1258, and was still a sparsely inhabited ruin when Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited the town somewhere at the end of the 1320s (he left Mecca for Iraq in November 1326). Although Ibn Baṭṭūṭa does not mention the plague here, it is safe to assume that it indeed was the Black Death that had recently emptied the city. When describing the city of Baghdad, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa noted that many of its mosques and madrasas "were in ruin (*kharabat*)."¹²⁷ For Marrakech, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa uses the closely related *al-khirāb* which could mean either desolation or ruin. But Ibn Baṭṭūṭa does not seem to suggest that Marrakech was in a physically bad shape. This is not surprising, as no known sources suggest that Marrakech endured a siege during this period. In fact, Marrakech was still an important urban center. The enormous madrasa built by Abū al-Ḥassan shows how Marrakech was still being developed under the Marinids. Seeing how the plague had affected the region, it would not be surprising that it was the emptiness of the city that reminded Ibn Baṭṭūṭa of Baghdad.

Just a few months after visiting Marrakech, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa set out from Fes southwards on his final journey: to the *Bilād al-Sūdān*, 'the Black Countries,' the general name used by the Arabs for the lands lying south of the Sahara. He crossed the Atlas Mountains and arrived in Sijilmāsa, a city that seemingly was not struck by the plague yet:

I arrived at Sijilmāsa. It is one of the best cities. It has many excellent dates, in which it resembles Basra, except that the dates of Sijilmāsa are better, and their quality is unparalleled.¹²⁸

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's description of Sijilmāsa greatly contrasts that of Leo Africanus, who visited the town in 1514 and found the town in ruins:

Segelmesse [Sijilmāsa] était une ville bien policée et avais de belles maisons. Ses habitants étaient riches à cause du commerce qu'ils pratiquaient avec la Pays des Noirs. Elle possédait de beaux temples et des collèges pourvus de nombreuses fontaines dont l'eau venait de la rivière. [...] A présent Segelmesse est complètement ruinée et,

¹²⁷ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihla*, 130.

¹²⁸ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, 392.

comme nous l'avons dit, ses habitants se sont regroupés dans des châteaux et disséminés un peu partout dans tout le territoire.¹²⁹

According to Africanus, the collapse of Sijilmāsa could be directly related to the decline of the Marinid state. He pinpointed the collapse of Sijilmāsa to somewhere after 1393, when the inhabitants of the town destroyed the walls of the city fortress and killed its governor.¹³⁰ Oral traditions from the region today blame the fall of the city on the tyranny of the “Black Sultan.” This oral narrative could be related to the years of 1331-1332 when Abū al-Ḥassan besieged the city to deal with a rebellious brother.¹³¹ Seeing Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s glowing description, it remains a question to what extent the city was damaged during that siege. Whatever the cause, it is for now impossible to say whether the plague ever visited the town. In chapter three we will return to Leo Africanus’ account of the city’s destruction.

The Black Death and West Africa: Archaeological Evidence

After a short stay in Sijilmāsa, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa crossed the Sahara and made his way to the court of *Mansa* Suleyman. Just as in Sijilmāsa, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa made no reference of the Black Death in West Africa. In fact, no contemporary authors do so. And for quite some time it was assumed that the Black Death indeed had not reached West Africa. But over the last few decades, archaeological research started to shed a new light on this topic. The first archaeologist to carefully speculate on the presence of the plague was Roderick McIntosh, who in 1998 was unable to explain the sudden abandonment of settlements in the Jenne-Jeno region in Mali. Settlements that had been inhabited uninterrupted for centuries and formed a nucleus in both the West African and Trans-Saharan trade networks vanished in a relative short time span.¹³² This notion was further developed into a hypothesis by Gérard Chouin and Christopher R. DeCorse.

¹²⁹ Jean-Léon L’Africain, *Description de l’Afrique* 2, ed and trans. A. Épaulard (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1956), 430.

¹³⁰ Dale R. Lightfoot and Jamer A. Miller, “Sijilmasa: The Rise and Fall of a Walled Oasis in Medieval Morocco,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86, no. 1 (Mar., 1996): 95.

¹³¹ Messier and Miller, *The Last Civilized Place: Sijilmasa and its Saharan Destiny* (USA: University of Texas Press, 2015), 132.

¹³² McIntosh’s observations will be discussed further down this chapter.

In their 2010 article, Chouin and DeCorse first noted how multiple fortified settlements, ‘earthworks,’ in Ghana were all abandoned during the mid-14th century. Formulating a hypothesis that this may have been part of a wide scale event, Chouin and DeCorse noted that:

Whatever happened must have been quite sudden, able to affect a vast area, and traumatic enough to dramatically alter people’s way of life within a generation, wiping out the structures of a centuries-old agrarian order.¹³³

Chouin and DeCorse argued that from a chronological perspective, the Black Death would be the most logical explanation for such an event.¹³⁴ Monica H. Green criticized the two authors for their hypothesis, stating that:

in placing plague in sub-Saharan Africa, Chouin and DeCorse were overinterpreting the superficial and unsubstantiated claims of a non-academic book published nearly thirty years earlier (Cartwright and Biddiss 1972). To date, there is neither bioarcheological research nor aDNA [ancient DNA] to tell us what happened to these societies which, it seems, left no written records. Hence, the question of plague’s possible penetration across the Sahara to West Central Africa must remain for the moment an open question.¹³⁵

Although Chouin and DeCorse indeed referred to the work of Cartwright and Biddiss in their article, their hypothesis was more than just an overinterpretation of said work. Chouin and DeCorse posited their hypothesis in the context of the debate surrounding the ‘Big Bang’ Theory, that was developed by the historian Ivor Wilks. According to this theory, Ghanaian society underwent a revolutionary transformation following the first contact with European merchants in the 15th century. This cultural ‘big bang’ supposedly transformed the hunter-gatherer societies into agrarian societies, which in turn spawned the first complex political structures of the region.¹³⁶ It was through the archaeological surveys of the likes of Chouin and

¹³³ Gérard Chouin and Christopher R. DeCorse, “Preludes to the Atlantic Trade: New Perspectives on Southern Ghana’s Pre-Atlantic History (800-1500),” *Journal of African History* 51 (2010): 143.

¹³⁴ Chouin and DeCorse, “Prelude to the Atlantic Trade,” 143.

¹³⁵ Green, “Taking ‘Pandemic’ Seriously,” 44.

¹³⁶ Ivor Wilks, “Land, Labour, Capital, and the Forest Kingdom of Asante: A Model of Early Change” in *The Evolution of Social Systems*, ed. J. Friedman and M. J. Rowlands, 487-534 (London: Duckworth, 1977); Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993).

DeCorse that convincing evidence emerged that firmly disproved Wilks' 'Big Bang' Theory.¹³⁷ However, the question of why these Ghanaian societies seemingly underwent such a radical change between 1500-1700 remained. The Black Death as a 'big bang,' was posited as a possible answer to this question.¹³⁸ In a later paper, Monica H. Green agreed that the Black Death could indeed have been an important cause for the demographic collapse, but also showed that there still are more questions that needed to be answered in regards to exactly how and when the plague arrived.¹³⁹ However, the archaeological data tells its own grim story. In the following paragraphs, data from the archaeological sites of Essouk-Tadmekka, Jenne-Jeno, and the plains of Sadia will be discussed to show how the demographic collapse noted by Chouin and DeCorse in Ghana, was widespread and representative for developments around the entire sub-continent.

The archaeological data of the Trans-Saharan trading town of Tādmekka, the result of excavations undertaken by archaeologist Sam Nixon, gives us an excellent impression of the wider developments within the West-African subcontinent.¹⁴⁰ Tādmekka was a trading town located on the fringe of the Sahara in modern-day Northern Mali. Its eastern location made it an important hub for traders coming and going to both modern-day Tunisia and Egypt. It is one of the oldest known places of West Africa, being mentioned first in the 9th century work of Ibn Ḥawqal.¹⁴¹ Two centuries later, the Andalusian scholar al-Bakrī gave the first proper description of the town:

Tādmekka resembles Mecca (the honored, the great, God honors and enhances her) of all the places in the world the most. And 'tād' means to them [in the language of the native population of Tādmekka] *its appearance is similar to that of Mecca's*. [Tādmekka] is a large town located between mountains and ravines. She is better build

¹³⁷ For example, the about two dozen of settlements described by DeCorse in C. R. DeCorse, "Coastal Ghana in the First and Second Millennia AD: Change in Settlement patterns, subsistence and technology," *Journal des Africanistes* 72, no. 2 (2005): 3.

¹³⁸ Gérard Chouin, "The 'Big Bang' Theory Reconsidered: Some Thoughts on the Fabric of Early Ghanaian History" (Paper presented at the 50th Anniversary Conference, Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 2012), 23-26.

¹³⁹ Green, "Putting Africa on the Black Death Map," paragraph 67-68:

¹⁴⁰ Sam Nixon "Excavating Essouk-Tadmakka (Mali): new archaeological investigations of early Islamic trans-Saharan trade," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 44 no. 2 (2009): 217-255.

¹⁴¹ Nixon, "Excavating Essouk-Tadmekka," 221.

than the cities of Ghāna and Kawkaw. The people of Tādmekka are Muslim Berbers who veil themselves like the Berbers of the desert veil themselves.¹⁴²

Nixon divided his findings into four periods. The four periods are all characterized by their architectural structures and the found material culture e.g. pottery shards, trading goods etc.¹⁴³ After a longer period of semi-permanent occupation, Tādmekka developed into a permanently inhabited settlement somewhere between 750-950.¹⁴⁴ During this period of semi-permanent occupation, the found material culture primarily exists of pottery of a local Berber tradition. A single shard of pottery was found which style resembled ceramic traditions from areas further south, that may suggest contact with those areas; while a single iron slag showed a proficiency for melting iron.¹⁴⁵ The amount of cultural material considerably increases from 750 CE onwards. Besides a continuation of the local pottery tradition, the first signs of Trans-Saharan trade emerge in the form of Islamic glass, the appearance of wheat. Evidence for long distance trade connections with the Middle Niger/Niger Bend area to the south also appear in the form of potsherds from that area. Most importantly, three gold coin molds found in a layer specifically dated to 850-900 CE, form the earliest evidence for the trade of gold in the settlement.¹⁴⁶

In the 950-1100 CE layer, the international dimensions of the trading town become more clear. Nixon reports the spectacular find of a shard of Qingbai Chinese Porcelain. Gold, cowries and shells; all valid means of payment in the subcontinent, are now also present in smaller quantities, as well as glass beads in larger quantities. Copper is now also found in large quantities.¹⁴⁷ The first found remains of a camel, solidify the image of a bustling Trans-Saharan trading town. From 1100-1300 CE, some changes seem to occur. Imported pottery from the Niger River region starts to become more and more present. Copper and silver coins found were also dated to this period. Trans-Saharan trade items remain an important factor, but gold coins are seemingly no longer struck at the site. Metalworking in general seems to stop being practiced in the town.¹⁴⁸ Tādmekka also underwent physical changes during this period. The

¹⁴² Abū 'Ubayd Al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa-l-Mamālik* 2, ed. A.P. van Leeuwen and A. Ferre, (Tunis: al-Mu'assasa al-Waṭaniya al-Tarjama wa al-Taḥqīq wa al-Dirāsā, 1992) 880.

¹⁴³ Nixon, "Excavating Essouk-Tadmekka," 234.

¹⁴⁴ Nixon, 224-226.

¹⁴⁵ Nixon, 236-239.

¹⁴⁶ Nixon, 239.

¹⁴⁷ Nixon, 241.

¹⁴⁸ Nixon, 241-242.

most noticeable one being the departures made in the architectural style of the buildings from 1100 onwards.¹⁴⁹ Nixon related these changes to Tādmekka's shifting political role, from an independent town towards being part of a larger empire, namely the Almoravid Empire and the Mali Empire.¹⁵⁰

But it is during the final phase (1300-1400 CE) of the town's existence that radical changes seem to take place. Although some areas were abandoned at the beginning of the century, the town seemingly grew in size, and remained to be a significant town in this part of the Sahel.¹⁵¹ Trans-Saharan trade items also remain present. But changes in the material culture suggest that a massive cultural change took place. The local pottery tradition seemingly dies out, being replaced by a new type of pottery that had only existed in small quantities in the centuries before. Metalworking makes a return. For the first time, a radical change in diet takes place as well, with cattle, dogs and wild animals replacing sheep and goats as the primary sources of meat for the town.¹⁵² The change of diet was accompanied by a dramatic sequence of repeated violent destructions and rebuilding of the buildings on the site. Finally, at the end of the 14th century, after almost seven centuries of continuous habitation, the town was abandoned.¹⁵³

What caused Tādmekka to disappear? Nixon related the repeated destructions and rebuildings to the political decline of the Mali Empire. Nixon points to a passage in al-'Umarī's work, where al-'Umarī stated that Tādmekka had become an independent town again. Al-'Umarī also noted that the town's population was now a 'white' town, a contrast with Ibn Hawqal's description that stated that a part of the population had been 'black.' Nixon correlated these remarks with the change of diet noted from 1300 onwards, and suggested that these changes were the indication of Berber nomads who had wrested control of the town from Mali at the beginning of the 14th century. The cycles of destruction and rebuilding in this light representing a prolonged struggle between the Mali Empire and the Berber nomads fighting for control over the town. Although Nixon states that it was still unknown why Tādmekka was finally abandoned, he hypothesized that "Berber intergroup conflict" perhaps played a role in its demise.¹⁵⁴ However, when we compare the data of Tādmekka to other archaeological sites in West Africa, it becomes clear that the decline of Tādmekka was part of a wider pattern.

¹⁴⁹ Nixon, "Excavating Essouk-Tadmekka," 227-229.

¹⁵⁰ Nixon, 249.

¹⁵¹ Nixon, 245.

¹⁵² Nixon, 242-243.

¹⁵³ Nixon, 230, 234-235.

¹⁵⁴ Nixon, 245-246, 250.

As mentioned above, McIntosh was the first archaeologist to suggest the possible presence of the Black Death, based on his data from the Jenne-Jeno region in the Middle Niger River Region. Like Tādmekka, the great Mande city of Jenne-Jeno was abandoned at the end of the 14th century, alongside its urban ring of ‘satellite cities.’¹⁵⁵ Unlike Tādmekka, which was a medium sized town of a few thousand souls, the Jenne-Jeno region was an urbanized environment where an estimated 50.000 people inhabited just a few square kilometers of land.¹⁵⁶ The story surrounding the abandonment is complex however, and seemingly consisted of various waves of abandonment that crested around 1400 CE. The earlier waves of abandonment could often be explained as signs of displacement and migration, caused by climate change and a change in food production from rice to millet that encouraged relocations to new grounds. By 1400 CE however, the abandonment was a clear result of “massive depopulation, migrations, and probable (but as yet) invisible unrest.”¹⁵⁷ A similar demographic collapse was noted in the Méma region, located further away from the Niger westwards of Jenne-Jeno. The ‘Méma cataclysm’ took place somewhere between the 13th to late 15th century.¹⁵⁸ Speculating on the possible presence of the Black Death, McIntosh pointed to the hundreds of terracotta statuettes from this period that are depicted with, what seems to resemble buboes and pustules.¹⁵⁹

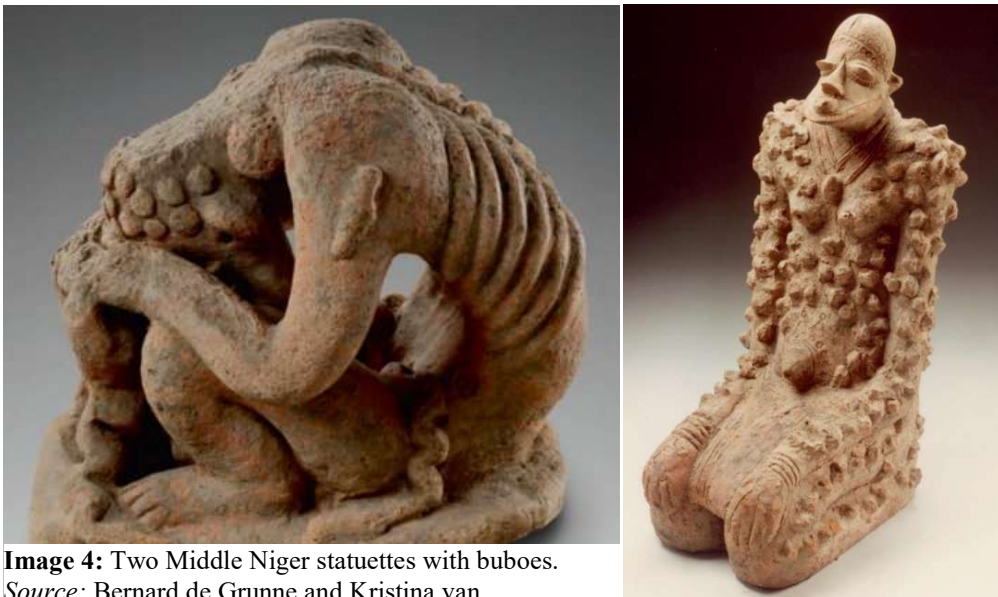


Image 4: Two Middle Niger statuettes with buboes.
Source: Bernard de Grunne and Kristina van Dyke, *Mande: Trésors Millénaires / Ancient Treasures* (Belgium: Tribal Fine Arts, 2016), 66, 68.

¹⁵⁵ McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger*, 245.

¹⁵⁶ McIntosh, 200.

¹⁵⁷ McIntosh, 245-246.

¹⁵⁸ McIntosh, 246-247.

¹⁵⁹ See image 4; McIntosh, 248-249.

The lack of visible signs of violence is an important difference from the data from Tādmekka. Although one cannot fully exclude the possibility of violence in the case of Jenne-Jeno, there are other examples of 14th century abandonment that exclude that possibility altogether. One of these examples are the *Tells* (settlement mounds) of Sadia, located south of the Niger River in the modern-day Mopti region of Mali. The *Tells* of Sadia are interesting because they lay relatively far away from the Niger River and its surrounding urban centers. Archaeological fieldwork on the site was undertaken in 2011 and described in a paper by Huysecom, Ozainne, et al.¹⁶⁰ Despite their relative distance from the main urban centers of the region, the network of villages participated in both regional and transregional trade, albeit on a modest scale.¹⁶¹ The data from these *tells* likewise tell a similar tale of demographic collapse in the 14th century. Despite their small size, they were stable settlements and had been continuously inhabited for at least four centuries.¹⁶² Their sudden abandonment again puzzled the archaeologists working on the site. Although they pointed to the possible effects of political instability in the Niger River Region, the data from the *tells* saw no signs of fortification, increase in iron weapons or anything of the like. They were also able to exclude “abrupt climate change or anthropogenic environmental degradation as the main cause for the abandonment of the Saida Mounts[.]”¹⁶³

However, the calculated date for the abandonment of the *tells* may challenge the Black Death hypothesis. Unlike Tādmekka and Jenne-Jeno, the *Tells* of Sadia’s collapsed somewhere during the first half of the 14th century, and was permanently abandoned around 1350.¹⁶⁴ A good 50 years before the other sites collapsed. Assuming that the plague was spread to West Africa via the Sahara, it would be impossible for the disease to have caused the collapse of the *Tells* of Sadia before the 1350s. Seeing how similar the developmental patterns of the *tells* were to those of Tādmekka and Jenne-Jeno, it is unlikely that the abandonment of the *tells* were caused by a different process. What then caused the decline of these *tells*? Huysecom, Ozainne, et al., who also pointed to the similarities with the chronological development of the nearby

¹⁶⁰ Huysecom, Ozainne et al, “The Tells of Saida,” 8.

¹⁶¹ Huysecom, Ozainne et al, 20.

¹⁶² Huysecom, Ozainne et al, 14.

¹⁶³ Huysecom, Ozainne et al, 29-30.

¹⁶⁴ Huysecom, Ozainne et al, 29-30; see also fig. 4 on p. 12 of the same work.

Tellem Caves,¹⁶⁵ do name “the large epidemics of plague and cholera which occurred during the 14th century” as the primary suspect.¹⁶⁶ But as stated above this makes little sense from a chronological sense. Further research will hopefully help explain these alternative dates.¹⁶⁷ It is clear however, that some kind of disease swept the subcontinent. There are many more examples of West African settlements that were abandoned during the latter half of the 14th century, that show similar chronological patterns as the examples discussed above.¹⁶⁸

The Black Death and West Africa: Primary Sources

The primary historical sources can perhaps further help us pinpoint the development of the disease in West Africa. As stated above, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa did not mention the presence of the Black Death in West Africa. In fact, we saw that he applauded the safety of the realm.¹⁶⁹ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s description of a plague-less West Africa prompted Gérard Chouin to doubt the historicity of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s journey to West Africa. Noting that other parts of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s *Rihla* contain grave errors and outright lies (e.g. his fabricated journey to Constantinople), Chouin raised the question whether Ibn Baṭṭūṭa ever traveled to West Africa.¹⁷⁰ Although it would require a close-reading of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s work to properly answer his valid concern, I do wish to make a comment in defense of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s narrative of West Africa. As Chouin rightly notes, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s work was not just a rapport of his voyage but:

a literary project aimed at a balanced description of wonders (cities, sultans, ceremonies, etc.) and marvels (organized in five categories), as suggested by the full

¹⁶⁵ The *Tellem Caves* tell a fascinating story that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. The *Tellem*, meaning ‘those we found’ in Dogon, were the people that inhabited the now-Dogon Plateau. They are yet another example of a complex society that seemingly vanished overnight. Their material legacy is extremely impressive, and includes very rare examples of intact medieval clothing. Some of the found *Tellem* objects are on display in Museum Volkenkunde.

¹⁶⁶ Huysecom, Ozainne et al, “The Tells of Sadiaa,” 30.

¹⁶⁷ In another paper discussing the results from the *tells* of Sadia archaeologists Daphne E. Gallagher and Stephen A. Dueppen suggest that different models suggest a later abandonment date for the *tells* see Daphne E. Gallagher and Stephen A. Dueppen, “Recognizing Plague Epidemics in the Archaeological Record of West Africa,” *Afriques* 9 (December 2018), paragraph 38-41: <https://journals.openedition.org/afriques/2198>.

¹⁶⁸ See for example the aforementioned paper by Gallagher and Dueppen; and J. Cameron Monroe, “‘Elephants for Want of Towns’: Archaeological Perspectives on West African Cities and Their Hinterlands,” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 26, no. 4 (2018): 387-446.

¹⁶⁹ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihla*, 401

¹⁷⁰ Gérard Chouin “Reflections on Plague in African History (14th-19th c.),” *Afriques* 9 (December 2018), paragraph 38-45: <https://journals.openedition.org/afriques/2228>.

title of the work: ‘Gift from those who observe the wonders of the great cities and the marvels of travelling’.¹⁷¹

However, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s description of West Africa comes across as authentic in my opinion. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa incorporated several Mande words into his narrative, and gave some unique descriptions of Mali that indeed were clearly aimed to bemuse or bewilder the reader of his work, but are likewise descriptions of authentic West African practices. A good example is Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s account of the masked dancing poets in the court of *Mansa* Sulayman:

And when Dūghā [the head poet] was finished playing on the feast day, the poets came. They are called al-Jūlā and one of them Jālī. Each of them was inside a shape made of feathers, resembling a *Shaqshāq*. [...] They say to the Sulṭān: Indeed this *Banbī* upon which you sit, above him used to be king such-and-such. And his good deeds were so-and-so. And such-and-such a king and his deeds were so-and-so.¹⁷²

There is no older description of West Africa’s famous *griots* than the one given here. Unlike Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s narrative of India, that is filled with miracles and magical encounters, his account of West Africa seems more rooted in reality. Levtzion and Hopkins suggested that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa maybe had no choice, seeing that his North African audience would have been more familiar with the lands of the Sūdān.¹⁷³ That said, it becomes possible to suggest that the plague did not reach West Africa during Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s stay there between 1352 and 1353. This is further supported when we consider the ‘goods’ that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa carried with him back to Fez. When Ibn Baṭṭūṭa departed from Tadakka (modern day Niger) for his last journey, his caravan was accompanied by around 600 slaves.¹⁷⁴ It is unlikely that he would have been able to take such a large number of people with him if the region had been recently plague-struck.

A possible date for the arrival of the Black Death may be found in Ibn Khaldūn’s history of the Mali Empire. According to Ibn Khaldūn, the Mali Empire faced a severe crisis during the reign of Mārī Jāṭa ibn Mansā Maghā (1360-1373), the one who had gifted a giraffe to the Marinid Sultan in 1360. Ibn Khaldūn based his account on the information provided by the

¹⁷¹ Chouin “Reflections on Plague,” paragraph 45.

¹⁷² Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihla*, 400.

¹⁷³ Nehemia Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, *Corpus of early Arabic sources for West African history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 280; furthermore, an interesting discussion on certain similarities between Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s account and that of al-‘Umarī can be found in the same work, 280-281.

¹⁷⁴ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihla*, 407.

qāḍi of Sijilmāsa, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammed ibn Wāsūl, “who had settled in the land of Kawkaw in their country and had been employed as a *qāḍi* there[.]”¹⁷⁵ According to Ibn Khaldūn this Mārī Jāta:

was a most wicked ruler over them because of the tortures, tyrannies, and improprieties to which he subjected them. [...] [H]e ruined their empire, squandered their treasure and all but demolished the edifice of their rule.¹⁷⁶

After Mārī Jāta’s death, his son Mūsā attempted to reconquer Takadda but failed to do so, giving the impression that the empire had not fully recovered yet. Ibn Khaldūn’s history of Mali ends abruptly here, stating that: “That is their situation at present,”¹⁷⁷ although he added a final paragraph when he received the news of Mūsā’s death and subsequent succession.¹⁷⁸

Is it possible to relate the disastrous rule of Mārī Jāta to the arrival of the Black Death? The fact that Ibn Khaldūn blamed Mārī Jāta for the troubles of the Mali Empire instead of a disease does not necessarily disprove the presence of the Black Death. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, Ibn Khaldūn had developed a cyclic framework, *aṣabiya* to explain the rise and fall of dynasties. Within this framework, weak and decadent rulers were the natural outcome of dynasties too long in power. Dynasties, like men, had a limited lifespan. Every dynasty, no matter how powerful during its rise, would eventually become sick and collapse, making room for a new dynasty to take over.¹⁷⁹ Looking at Ibn Khaldūn’s dynastic history of Mali, it is possible to place Mārī Jāta at the end, or almost at the end of such a cycle.¹⁸⁰ According to Ibn Khaldūn, some of the key telltale signs of a dynasty at the end of its life were overpopulation, famine and epidemic diseases.¹⁸¹ Having noted this, how then should Ibn Khaldūn’s account of Mārī Jāta be interpreted? It is possible to simply reject Ibn Khaldūn’s account on the basis that it fits his overarching *aṣabiya* theory too well. But this would be a mistake. Assuming that Ibn Khaldūn did not lie, he did receive information from Ibn Wāsūl

¹⁷⁵ Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of early Arabic sources*, 336.

¹⁷⁶ Levtzion and Hopkins, 335-336.

¹⁷⁷ Levtzion and Hopkins, 336.

¹⁷⁸ Levtzion and Hopkins, 337.

¹⁷⁹ Ibn Khaldūn, *De Muqaddima*, 134-137

¹⁸⁰ Austen and Jansen identified Mārī Jāta as the final ruler of a dynastic cycle that starts with the famous Mansa Mūsā who traveled to Egypt, see Ralph A. Austen and Jan Jansen, “History, Oral Transmission and Structure in Ibn Khaldun’s Chronology of Mali Rulers,” *History in Africa* 23 (1996): 20.

¹⁸¹ Ibn Khaldun, *De Muqaddima*, trans. Heleen Koesen and Djūke Poppinga (Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 2010), 216-217.

which he incorporated into his universal history. Mārī Jāta was a contemporary of Ibn Khaldūn, and the information relayed by Ibn Wāsūl had been relatively ‘fresh.’ If the Black Death indeed had reached West Africa it would have influenced the reign of Mārī Jāta. Ibn Khaldūn perhaps simply did not know that the plague had reached West Africa, but he did hear of the chaos the disease caused.¹⁸²

This notion may be supported by a fascinating passage from the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, written about 200 years after Ibn Khaldūn’s own time by the Timbuktu scholar ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Sa’dī (d. c. 1656). Although his work is primarily concerned with the later history of the Songhay Empire and beyond, a few chapters are dedicated to the Mali Empire. According to al-Sa’dī:

The ruler of Mali brought Songhay, Timbuktu, Diakha, Mema and Bāghana, and their neighbouring territories under his sway to as far as the salt sea. [...] The Malians enjoyed tremendous power and extraordinary might.¹⁸³

But it is because of this power and might, that disaster struck according to al-Sa’dī:

This led to tyranny, highhandedness and the violation of people’s rights in the latter days of their rule, so God Most High punished them by destroying them. One day in the early morning an army of God Most High in the form of human children appeared before them in the sultan’s palace. These children attacked them with swords, killing almost all of them, and then disappeared in the space of a single hour, by the power of the Mighty and Powerful One. No one knew where they came from or where they went to, but from that time onwards the Malians became weak and enfeebled.¹⁸⁴

Is this passage a West African memory of the Black Death? We can only speculate at this point, but it is plausible to a certain extent. Disasters are often explained as a form of divine punishment. In Europe, the Black Death was famously explained as such. In a way, al-Sa’dī remarks remind us of Ibn Khaldūn’s theory in that a natural disaster could be a logical moral

¹⁸² Although Ibn Khaldūn makes no reference to the plague, he did mention that Mārī Jāta suffered from the sleeping disease in the final two years of his life, see Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of early Arabic sources*, 335.

¹⁸³ John Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa’dī’s Ta’rīkh al-sūdān down to 1613 & other Contemporary Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 15.

¹⁸⁴ Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 15.

consequence of tyranny and poor leadership. That the plague, *plaga*, *ṭa'ūn*, the disease that struck you with blows, was an army of God sent to punish wickedness.

As Ibn Khaldūn rightly noted, the Black Death changed the face of “the entire inhabitable world.” Although it is at this stage impossible to prove that the Black Death visited West Africa, it is clear that the entire sub-continent underwent a dramatic demographic catastrophe that, from a chronological perspective, makes the Black Death the primary suspect. During this period, the Mali Empire went through a period of crisis and contraction, and it is plausible there is a connection with the demographic collapse. But the Mali Empire would not be the only state that would be affected by the disaster that struck West Africa. The Marinid Empire likewise was profoundly affected. For as we will see in the next chapter, it not only had to deal with the massive loss of human life, it also lost its most valuable material resource: gold.

Chapter 3: The Great Bullion Famine and the Marinid Decline



Image 5: Marinid Gold Dinar (c. 1244-1256 AD).

Source: <https://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/dynasties/northafrica/coins/c43>

After Abū al-Ḥassan's disastrous attempt to conquer Tunisia, the Marinid Empire was thrown into chaos, with several revolts challenging Abū al-Ḥassan's authority in different parts of the empire. However, after Abū 'Inān Fāris, who led one of the revolts, usurped the throne from Abū al-Ḥassan, he was able to restore order in both the Marinid heartlands in Morocco, as well as in the Algerian territories conquered by his father. For a few years, despite the devastating effects of the Black Death, the Marinid Empire seemed to continue as it had before. The empire was still extremely wealthy, and some of the most stunning Marinid edifices were erected during the reign of Abū 'Inān Fāris. But like his father, Abū 'Inān set his sights on Tunisia, and underwent a campaign that similarly ended in disaster. He returned to Fes so gravely ill that his vizier al-Ḥassan ibn 'Umar al-Fūdūdī exploited the situation by proclaiming one of Abū 'Inān's sons as the new heir of the Marinids, contrary to Abū 'Inān's own wishes. When Abū 'Inān seemed to recover, al-Fūdūdī, fearing for his own life, had the sultan strangled in 1358.¹⁸⁵ In the decades after Abū 'Inān's death, the Marinid Empire lost direct control over most regions, giving way to local dynasties or foreign powers. Ennahid noted that after the conquest of Ceuta by the Portuguese in 1420, the Marinids lost all central control.¹⁸⁶ We could consider this date as the effective collapse of central power, although the dynasty itself would live on for a few more decades. Thus, the six decades following Abū 'Inān's death can be seen as the most important period of the Marinid decline. It are these decades this chapter concerns itself with.

One of the most notable features of the Marinid decline was the lack of gold. As noted in the introduction, the Marinids were struck by not only a political crisis, but an economic crisis as well. Had something changed in the output of gold coming from West Africa to North Africa? By looking at the flow of gold bullion during this period, made visible in economic data from Europe, this chapter asks the question whether the influx of gold from West Africa declined or even stopped completely. Before doing so however, it is important to discuss the often-mentioned idea that the Trans Saharan trade routes shifted from western routes to more easterly located routes.

¹⁸⁵ Mediano, "the post-Almohad dynasties," 114-115.

¹⁸⁶ Ennahid, "Political Economy," 96.

A Shift from West to East in the Trans-Saharan trade routes?

The west-to-east shift theory has been well described by Mediano. According to this theory, the Marinids were confronted by a “gradual eastward displacement” of the Trans-Saharan trade routes.¹⁸⁷ There were three causes for this displacement. Firstly, the trade routes running along Sijilmāsa became increasingly insecure following the Almohad decline, caused partially by the rise of the Marinids themselves and partially by “marauding Ma’qil Arabs” who were dominant in the area around Sijilmāsa. Secondly, there was the beforementioned “desire on the part of the sultans of Mali to diversify their gold markets.” And thirdly, there was the entrance of Egypt as an important player in the Trans-Saharan trade, which caused the routes that ran along Tunis to increase in value at the expense of the routes running to Sijilmāsa. As such, these developments explained the attempts of both Abū al-Ḥassan and Abū ‘Inān to take control of Algeria and Tunisia.¹⁸⁸

The above theory is problematic for several reasons. The notion that the Marinid Empire was a weak state holds a strong sway here. The functioning of the empire and the importance of the gold trade have already been discussed in chapter one. There are no indications of financial troubles besetting the Marinid regime before the death of Abū ‘Inān, nor are there any signals the notion that the Mali Empire was diversifying its trade routes. In regard to the Ma’qil, it seems that developments taking place in the second half of the 14th century were projected back on the century before. The Ma’qil would indeed play a role in destabilizing the communities of the Tafilalt Oasis, but these issues mostly arose in the decades after Abū ‘Inān’s death.¹⁸⁹ This retrojection of events from the second half of the Marinid period onto the first seems to be the core issue with this theory. Having no real clear data on why the Marinid Empire started to decline, scholars simply pointed to the symptoms of the decline and supposed that they must have ‘gradually’ appeared. This becomes especially clear when we look at the economic history of Tunisia and the Hafsid dynasty.

Like the Marinids, the Hafsids formed a successor state after the decline of the Almohad Caliphate. The Hafsids were closely related to the Almohad elites, with the first Hafsid ruler being appointed as governor of Almohad Ifrīqiya (modern-day Tunisia and western Libya).¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Mediano, “post-Almohad,” 122.

¹⁸⁸ Mediano, 122-123.

¹⁸⁹ Lightfoot and Miller, “Sijilmasa,” 97-98.

¹⁹⁰ Maribel Fierro, “The Almohads (524–668/1130–1269) and the Ḥafṣids (627–932/1229–1526),” in *The New Cambridge History of Islam Volume 2: The Western Islamic World, Eleventh to Eighteenth Century*, ed. Maribel Fierro, 66-105 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87.

With the fall of the Almohad state, the Hafids drew the caliphal title towards them, a claim that was generally accepted by contemporaries, including by the first Marinid sultans who nominally subjected themselves to Hafsid rule. Their political power proved to be limited however, and the early Hafsid sultans and caliphs had trouble extending their governance far beyond Tunis, their capital.¹⁹¹ Between 1277 and 1370, the Hafsid dynasty was in great disarray, with rivalling princes fighting over the title of sultan.¹⁹² Historian Patricia Kabra noted that during the invasion of Abū Ḥassan these princes were so busy fighting themselves that “the only thing which really defeated the Merinids was the Black Death ravaging the city of Tunis.”¹⁹³

The economic picture of the Hafsid state was bleak during this time. According to Kabra, both the agricultural and commercial sectors suffered tremendously during this period. In regard to the gold trade, the difference between the Hafids and the Marinids was like day and night. Whereas the Marinid sultans had enormous quantities of gold at their disposal, the Hafids seemed to be unable to draw any new gold bullion to their realm throughout much of the 13th and 14th century. Kabra points to a revealing comment by al-‘Umari that it was impossible find any new coinage in Tunis, and that most money consisted of silver dirhams mixed with copper.¹⁹⁴ Even during the more stable reign of the second Hafsid ruler (Abū ‘Abd Allah Muḥamed al-Mustanṣir, 1249-1277) the financial situation already seemed dire. Gold coins were rarely struck, and for the minting of new silver and copper coins, the Hafids primarily debased older coins.¹⁹⁵ It seems that throughout much of the period, the Trans-Saharan trade was entirely closed off for Hafsid territory. European traders arriving in Hafsid ports found products such as salt, alum, lead, spices and fabrics that were either produced in Hafsid territory or imported from Eastern markets.¹⁹⁶ Typical Trans-Saharan trade items such as gold, slaves or ivory are conspicuously absent.

It is not easy to pinpoint why this was the case. It is certainly possible that the chaotic political situation had a negative effect on the existing Trans-Saharan trade routes running to Tunis. But seeing that the financial situation was already dire before 1277, this explanation is not sufficient. Instead, it seems that the roads running to Sijilmāsa were still dominating the entire Trans-Saharan trade. Sijilmāsa’s central position was so important that all three

¹⁹¹ Fierro, “the Hafids,” 87-89.

¹⁹² Fierro, 90.

¹⁹³ Kabra, “Hafsid Ifrīqīya,” 290.

¹⁹⁴ Kabra, 277.

¹⁹⁵ Kabra, 275-277.

¹⁹⁶ Kabra, 311.

successor states sought control over the oasis town after the Almohad collapse. Being an Almohad insider, the first Hafsīd ruler Abū Zakarīyā (1229-1249) was acknowledged as the true successor to Almohad rule by the governor of Sijilmāsa in 1242.¹⁹⁷ It was only after losing Sijilmāsa to the Marinids during the reign of al-Mustanşir that the financial troubles began.

Gold would eventually return to Tunis, but only as late as in the 15th century. The historian Robert Brunschvig notes that gold bars were being exported to Genoa and Pisa, although it is unclear in which quantities and for how long this had been occurring.¹⁹⁸ It seems unlikely however that this trade would have been comparable to the earlier Marinid trade in volume, which becomes clear when we turn to the economic developments of medieval Europe.

The Great Bullion Famine of the late Fifteenth Century

As mentioned in chapter one, an important part of the medieval Mediterranean economy was the dual bullion famine that caused large volumes of silver bullion move from Europe to the Middle East and gold bullion from West Africa to move to Europe. The massive export of silver to the Middle East from Europe, enhanced by the trade deficit on the part of the European traders, eventually led to the emergence of gold currencies instead of silver currencies in Europe. This greatly improved the stability of European currencies, as gold coins were less likely than silver coins to be sucked away to the bullion hungry markets in the Middle East (although gold was likewise exported to the Eastern markets). However, from the 14th century onwards, dramatic changes in the European economy occurred, leading some to speculate that Europe had lost its access to West African gold.

The so-called “Great Depression of the Renaissance” was a period of economic downturn for most European societies and states when compared to the 12th-14th century. Following the Black Death, repeating outbreaks of plague and long periods of sustained warfare characterized much of the late 14th and 15th century. Historians for obvious reasons, generally looked at demographic factors to explain this crisis, pointing to the disastrous effects of disease and warfare. However, a group of historians known as the ‘monetarists’ argued that there was an important financial factor at play.¹⁹⁹ The most extensive ‘monetary’ argument was

¹⁹⁷ Kabra, “Hafsīd Ifrīqīya,” 273.

¹⁹⁸ Robert Brunschvig, *La Berbérie Orientale sous les Hafsīdes : des Origines a la fin du XV^e Siècle* (Paris, 1947), 263-264.

¹⁹⁹ Nathan Sussman, “The Late Medieval Bullion Famine Reconsidered,” *The Journal of Economic History* 58, No. 1 (March 1998): 126.

made by economic historian John Day, whose ‘great bullion famine’ pointed to a collapse in bullion stock throughout Europe. In the next few paragraphs his theory will be discussed.

According to Day, the economies of medieval Europe were essentially “hard money” economies, meaning that coins remained the primary means of monetary payment. The value of these coins was based on the quantity of precious metals they contained.²⁰⁰ As shown in chapter one, the European continent was particularly rich in silver, and for a long time was the go-to metal for coinage. However, the movements caused by the double bullion famine: the large influx of West African gold to Europe, alongside with the drainage of silver to eastern markets, led to the appearance of gold coins serving as basic coinage all over Europe. This system essentially remained unchanged throughout the 12th to the 14th century. Day argued however, that after the 14th century European societies seemingly had to deal with shortages in both gold and silver bullion.

Within a few decades, mints throughout Europe sharply produced their output, or stopped functioning entirely. In France, between 1392 and 1402, the coinage of both silver and gold stopped almost completely, with most mints closing down. Compared to data from the early 14th century, the output of silver coins in 1402 was ten times less, the output of gold in the same year was six times less.²⁰¹ The price of bullion increased tremendously during this period, signifying the increasing rarity of both silver and gold.²⁰² In the following decades, French mints were sometimes able to mint large quantities of both gold and silver, but this was only possible by major recoinage projects, meaning no new bullion was attracted.²⁰³

In Flanders, home to the busiest mints in Europe during most of the 14th century, the pattern was similar. Under Louis de Male (1346-84) an average of 1750 kg of gold and 6000 kg of silver were struck every year at the mints of Bruges, Ghent and Mechelen. From 1392 onwards however, both the Ghent and Mechelen mints stopped producing almost immediately, whereas the Bruges mint was able to produce new coins until it too ceased production in 1402.²⁰⁴ The mints of the Duchy of Brabant follow a similar pattern, and the period of 1390-94 seemingly was a turning point in the output of mints throughout the entire region.²⁰⁵

Day describes how local authorities in Bruges sought to force idle metal possibly being kept in hoards back into the economy. In September 1399, the authorities suspended payments

²⁰⁰ Day, “Great Bullion Famine,” 3-4.

²⁰¹ Day, 13-14.

²⁰² Day, 13.

²⁰³ Day, 15.

²⁰⁴ Day, 16.

²⁰⁵ Day, 17.

of bills of exchange by bank transfers, and merchants were ordered to settle all exchanges in hard coin by February 1400. The results were disappointing, however, and the rule was retracted later that same year.²⁰⁶ In the Kingdom of England, the decline of monetary circulation already became visible in the 1370s, with the annual output of gold decreasing from £56.064 in 1361-70 to just £9.631 in 1371-1380. Although the output rose a little between 1380-1400, it almost fully collapsed from 1400 onwards. Day gives no numbers for the output of silver before 1400, but the amount of silver produced after 1400 amounted to almost nothing.²⁰⁷

Comparing these numbers to data from Mediterranean countries, it becomes clear that the bullion crisis was a continental one. Although the Mediterranean economies were generally stronger than their North European counterparts, mints likewise had trouble attracting new bullion. Although the decline of the mints was less dramatic than it was in the North, they did decrease their output along a similar timeframe as the northern mints. Day's comparison of the monetary situation in Aragon, Florence, Genoa, and Milan, show that all these economies faced problems with the attraction of new bullion.²⁰⁸ When looking at the average production of gold throughout the 14th century in Europe (see table 2), a clear downwards trend can be seen from 1370 onwards.

| Years: | Minted gold (kg) |
|---------------|-------------------------|
| 1301-10 | - |
| 1311-20 | 402 |
| 1321-30 | - |
| 1331-40 | 454 |
| 1341-50 | 452 |
| 1351-60 | 678 |
| 1361-70 | 699 |
| 1371-80 | 327 |
| 1381-90 | 215 |
| 1391-00 | 172 |

²⁰⁶ Day, "Great Bullion Famine," 17.

²⁰⁷ Day, 18.

²⁰⁸ Day, 20-24, 27-28.

²⁰⁹ Table taken from John Day, *The Medieval Market Economy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1987) 64.

| | |
|-----------|-----|
| 1401-10 | 47 |
| 1411-20 | 242 |
| 1421-30 | 235 |
| 1431-40 | 166 |
| 1441-50 | 40 |
| 1451-60 | 98 |
| 1461-70 | 162 |
| 1471-80 | 120 |
| 1481-90 | 70 |
| 1491-1500 | 83 |

Why were European societies unable to attract new metals like they had before? In regard to silver, the reduced output of silver mines was the most important cause according to Day. The production of silver mines declined throughout the 14th century, with major mines closing due to natural disaster, exhaustion or simply a shortage of labor following the Black Death.²¹⁰ In regards to gold, Day argued that from the second half of the 14th century, gold no longer arrived from Africa in the same quantities as it did during the first half.²¹¹ Genoa for example, was one of the major importers of gold during this period. Based on custom records from 1376-7 and mint accounts for 1341, 1365, 1370 and 1373, Day argued that Genoa imported somewhere between 400-800 kilos of gold on a yearly basis.²¹² The prominence of gold for the Genoese mints can be seen in relation to the output of silver coins during this period, as silver coins only constituted 8% of all struck coins during this period.²¹³ When we look at the next surviving mint accounts from the early 15th century, the Genoese output of new gold coins had declined dramatically. Between 1412-1414 Genoese mints were able to strike around 141,798 gold florins, whereas they often were able to strike over 200,000 coins in a single year in the century before.²¹⁴

Day pointed to the “dynastic wars and tribal anarchy of the later fourteenth century” that affected both Mali and the Marinids as the primary cause for the decline of the gold trade. Pointing to Ibn Khaldūn’s remark that Mārī Jāta had wasted the wealth of his land, Day argued

²¹⁰ Day, “Great Bullion Famine,” 35.

²¹¹ Day, 36.

²¹² Day, 37.

²¹³ Day, 28.

²¹⁴ Day, 27.

that it was the destabilization of the trade network, rather than problems with the production of gold that caused the lack of gold bullion in Europe.²¹⁵ According to Day, the Trans-Saharan trade networks were never able to recover, which ended the story of African gold in Europe.²¹⁶

The ‘Great Bullion Famine’ theory is controversial, and debates regarding whether European societies faced a lack of bullion have never really settled.²¹⁷ In an article summarizing the debate, John Munro shows that one of the problems with the arguments provided by the monetarists is that they were never able to agree on some fundamental questions surrounding their own theories.²¹⁸ What caused the reduction of Europe’s bullion stock (Day’s suggestions are not the only ones) and when did it commence? When did it stop again? In regard to the gold bullion, Munro argues that two important questions that remain unanswered are whether the gold trade truly diminished in the late medieval period and to what extent “indigenous African factors” played a role in this process.²¹⁹

These final questions take us back to the Marinid decline. Is it possible to link Day’s bullion data to the Marinid decline? In the remaining paragraphs of this chapter, the years during and following Abū ‘Inān’s reign will be analyzed, keeping in mind both the data from Day and the archaeological data from West Africa described in the previous chapter. By doing so, a new view on this confused period becomes possible.

The Marinid Decline: The Succession Crisis (1358-1372)

Between Abū ‘Inān Fāris’ death in 1358 and 1400, a total of thirteen sultans would sit on the Marinid throne, giving an average length of rulership of three years per monarch. There were many ups and downs however during these decades, and it is possible to divide these four decades into several distinct periods. The first period following Abū ‘Inān’s death was a civil war that lasted for about 10 years and was dominated by a political struggle within the court of Fes. A second period of relative stability and recovery followed with the reign of Abū al-Fariz ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (1366-1372). His death was followed by a third period of great instability and

²¹⁵ Day, “Great Bullion Famine,” 37-38.

²¹⁶ Day, 97-98.

²¹⁷ For an impressive overview of the debate up until 1983 see John H. A. Munro, “Bullion Flows and Monetary Contraction in late-Medieval England and the Low Countries,” in *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds*, ed. J. F. Richards, 97-158 (USA: Carolina Academic Press, 1983); for after 1983 see among others Nathan Sussman, “The Late Medieval Bullion Famine Reconsidered” *Journal of Economic History* 58, no. 1 (1998): 126-15 and Martin Allen, “The Sources of Bullion for English Coinage,” in *Mints and Money in Medieval England*, 238-294 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²¹⁸ Munro, “Bullion Flows,” 97-98.

²¹⁹ Munro, 103.

infighting, that was characterized by a powerless central government and ultimately doomed the empire.

The first years following Abū ‘Inān’s death were extremely chaotic and characterized by several palace coups.²²⁰ Abū ‘Inān was succeeded by his young son Muḥamed Abū Zayyān al-Sa’īd, who was a virtual puppet of al-Fūdūdī. Deemed incapable of ruling due to disease, he was strangled within a year and replaced by his brother Abū Bakr al-Sa’īd who likewise was a puppet of al-Fūdūdī. His reign lasted for a total of “seven months and twenty days” until he also was murdered in 1359.²²¹ He was succeeded by a brother of Abū ‘Inān Fāris, named Abū Salīm (d. 1361), who was able to turn the tide on al-Fūdūdī, and had him murdered, only to be murdered a few months later by another member of the al-Fūdūdī family, a vizier named Mas’ūd bin Raḥū bin Māsī.²²² Abū Salīm was in turn succeeded by an elder brother named Tāshfīn (d. 1361) who, in an unexpected turn of events, died of old age after sitting on the throne for only three months and two days.²²³ He was succeeded by a grandson of Abū Ḥassan, named Abū Zayyān Muḥamed (d. 1366).²²⁴

With the ascension of Abū Zayyān Muḥamed came a temporary end to the rapid successions that characterized the previous three years, but not to the wider problems plaguing the empire at this point. Beyond the gates of Fes, the empire was carved up by competing Marinid princes who attempted to take the throne by building local alliances and securing foreign support.²²⁵ One of the biggest challengers to central authority during these years came from a man named ‘Āmer bin Moḥamed bin ‘Alī, who was the shaykh of the Hintāta tribe and governor of Marrakech. The details of his rise to power, rebellion and ultimate defeat shed a light on why the empire became so divided.

The Hintāta were a tribal confederation that played an important role throughout much of the medieval period. Their primary territory was located in the High Atlas under Marrakech. They served as vassals of the Almohad Empire, and the Hafsid rulers of Tunisia were members of this tribe. Despite their ties to both the Almohads and the Hafsids, the Hintāta shaykhs proved to be loyal allies to the Marinids. In 1310, the Hintāta shaykh Mūsā bin ‘Alī bin

²²⁰ Making these years well suited to be adapted into a season of Game of Thrones.

²²¹ Ismā’īl ibn al-Aḥmar, *Rawḍa al-Nasrīn fī Dawla Banī Marīn*, ed. ‘Abd al-Wahāb ibn Manṣūr (Rabat: al-Muṭba’a al-Malikiyya, 2003), 47-48.

²²² Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh*, 647-652.

²²³ Al-Aḥmar, *Rawḍa al-Nasrīn*, 42.

²²⁴ Abū Zayyān Muḥamed was the son of Ya’qūb, an older brother of Abū ‘Inān Fāris, see al-Aḥmar, *Rawḍa al-Nasrīn*, 43.

²²⁵ Mediano, “The post-Almohad dynasties”, 116.

Muḥamed was promoted to the role of governor of Marrakech by Abū Sa’īd ‘Uthmān II. ‘Āmer was Mūsā’s nephew, and succeeded as sheikh when Mūsā died. ‘Āmer likewise was a loyal vassal, and he was one of the prominent members of Abū Ḥassan’s entourage during his disastrous campaign in Tunisia. After Abū ‘Inān Fāris rose in rebellion against his father, ‘Āmer remained at Abū Ḥassan’s side until the very end. When Abū Ḥassan died, he did so in the Middle Atlas in Hintāta territory, still attempting to reclaim the realm back from his son.²²⁶ ‘Āmer swore allegiance to Abū ‘Inān after Abū Ḥassan died, but his loyalty was questionable after this point. In 1353, shortly after (and perhaps for) his declaration of loyalty, ‘Āmer was named overall leader of the wider Maṣāmuda tribes by Abū ‘Inān. In the next few years, ‘Āmer became increasingly influential, effectively becoming the sole ruler over Southern Morocco. When he finally came into conflict with the new and effective ruler ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (r. 1366-1372), he had effectively reigned over Southern Morocco as an independent ruler from Marrakech for several years. He backed his own claimant to the Marinid throne, a man named Tashfīn bin Abū Thābit ibn Ya’qūb bin ‘Abd Allah, who he had proclaimed sultan.²²⁷ His forces were unable to defeat the armies led by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz however, and he was forced to retreat into the Atlas. He was eventually captured and brought to Fes where he was gruesomely tortured and killed.²²⁸

‘Āmer’s transformation from loyal vassal to rebel show that the roots of the civil war lie at least partially with Abū ‘Inān’s successful coup against his father. His revolt pitted various Marinid factions against each other for four years, creating fuzzy boundaries between loyal subjects and traitors. After Abū Ḥassan’s death, people like ‘Āmer had little choice but to accept the man they had been fighting for years as their new overlord. Abū ‘Inān attempted to glue the realm back together, by handing out promotions and rewards to men such as ‘Āmer but also by posthumously mending the relations with his father, whose body he respectfully interred at Chellah. ‘Āmer’s scheming shows, however, that the new status quo was not accepted by all. Reckoning ultimately came when Abū ‘Inān was finally strangled, and it is possible to see the years after his death as a new round of fighting between those who originally supported Abū Ḥassan and those who supported Abū ‘Inān. This decade of violence, taking place so close after the arrival of the Black Death must have been enormously challenging for all parties involved, and must have put enormous stress on the Marinid state.

²²⁶ Pierre de Cenival, “Les émirs des Hintata, « rois » de Marrakech” *Hespéris* 24, no 4 (1937): 247, 249-250; ‘Āmer’s rise to power is briefly described in ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh* 7, 623-625.

²²⁷ Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh* 7, 676.

²²⁸ Cenival, “Les émirs,” 250.

I believe, however, that this civil war was not the primary cause for the final collapse of the Marinid state. It is notable how strong the government in Fes proved to be during these years. Even during the most chaotic years at court, the Marinid forces were still very effective. During the short reign of Abū Salīm for example, a Marinid army was sent to Tlemcen (once again under Zayyanid control) which successfully conquered the city.²²⁹ Although Marinid control over these territories proved to be limited (another Zayyanid ruler was able to retake the city soon after Abū Salīm's death), they do show that the court at Fes had not lost its capabilities to organize an effective force. In fact, none of the regional challengers were able to mount an attack on the central region during this period. And the reason why may be relatively simple: The Marinids still had access to large quantities of gold.

As can be seen in Day's data, the highpoint of the European gold mint lay in the two decades between 1350 and 1370. If one interprets this as a proof for a continued supply of gold coming from West Africa, it means that the Marinids still could have had access to large quantities of bullion coming in, as well as access to any existing reserves hoarded in the capital. Although Sijilmāsa housed a Marinid contender in the first years of the civil war, it was eventually retaken by a Marinid force.²³⁰ With Sijilmāsa under central control, gold could still reach Fes. Gold allowed the central state to maintain its mercenary forces, which gave them the means to deal with the various rebellious factions. The civil war seemingly did not affect the influx of gold from West Africa, which may have helped the court at Fes to stay on top during these years.

However, the output of European mints sharply declined after 1370, suggesting that the influx of gold from West Africa was decreasing. Mirroring the declining output was the growing inability of the court at Fes to deal with both internal rivals and external threats. Between the death of 'Abd al-'Azīz and the ascendance and reign of Abū Sa'īd 'Uthmān (r.1399-1420) the Marinid state would slowly fall apart, limiting the influence of the Sultan and his court to Fes and its immediate surroundings. Although a lack of primary sources greatly obfuscates these decades, there are several indications that there is a link between the decreasing output of gold and the troubles that beset the Marinid Empire during this point.

²²⁹ Mediano, "The post-Almohad dynasties", 116.

²³⁰ Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh*, 663-666.

The Marinid Decline: The End of the Trans-Saharan Gold Trade?

The 1370s were marked by several great changes in North and West Africa and in Europe. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz died after a short period of illness in 1372, passing the throne on to his son who died before reaching his 5th birthday. The throne moved on to a son of Abū Salīm named Abū al-‘Abās Aḥmed (r. 1374-84, 1387-1393) in 1374.²³¹ 1374 was also the year when the ill-fated Mārī Jāta II of Mali died. As mentioned in chapter two, his reign from 1360 to 1374 was characterized by Ibn Khaldūn as one of financial and political disaster. This may have been the direct consequence of the Black Death finally arriving in West Africa, causing a demographic catastrophe that is visible within the archaeological record. With the Mali Empire in disarray and its population thinned out, gold no longer left West Africa in the quantities it had before. Data from the European mints supports this timetable. From 1370 to 1380, the European mints struck only half the amount of gold compared to the decade before, a drastic decrease. In the decades after the output of European mints was in free fall, reaching its low point in the first decade of 1400 with an average of only 47kg of gold minted each year.²³²

While the output of European mints decreased, the Marinid Empire fell apart. Despite Abū al-‘Abās’ longevity, his reign was beset by troubles. Although there no longer were hordes of pretenders attempting to seize the throne (although there still were a few, which explains the three-year hiatus between 1384-87), the Marinid Empire slowly disintegrated as the central government was unable to exercise control over its provinces. An early sign came in 1372, when Muḥamed V, the Emir of Granada, replaced the Marinid commander of the North African volunteers with a Granadian commander, ending a decades long arrangement.²³³ Two years later, Abū al-‘Abās and Muḥamed V came to an agreement in which Gibraltar, a city that likewise had been in Marinid hands for decades, was handed over to Muḥamed V. It is not entirely clear what the agreement entailed, but it seems to have been given in return for some kind of political or military aid.²³⁴

The southern part of the Marinid Empire was also permanently lost. Marrakech became the seat of an independent polity. Ibn Khaldūn’s final paragraphs on the Marinid dynasty deal with the conflicts between Abū al-‘Abās and his Marrakechi rival. Contrary to only a decade earlier, the Marinids were no longer able to effectively deal with the threat of a strong

²³¹ Al-Aḥmar, *Rawda al-Nasrīn*, 44-45, 49.

²³² See table 2.

²³³ Harvey, *Islamic Spain*, 216.

²³⁴ George Hill, *Rock of Contention: A History of Gibraltar* (London: Robert Hale & Company, 1974) 88.

independent southern ruler.²³⁵ It is also in the context of this struggle that Sijilmāsa was destroyed, or at least seriously damaged. As mentioned in chapter two, Leo Africanus commented on the fall of the city, describing how the region was affected when the Marinids withdrew from the region:

Elle [Sijilmāsa] fut dominée par la famille des Beni Marin. Son gouvernement fut confié aux proches parents des rois, en principe à leurs fils. Il en fut ainsi jusqu'à la mort d'Achmed [Abū al-'Abās], roi de Fez. Alors la province se souleva, les habitants du pays tuèrent le gouverneur et démolirent le mur d'enceinte de la ville. Celle-ci est demeurée déserte jusqu'au temps présent. Les gens se sont regroupés et ont bâti de gros châteaux parmi les propriétés et les cantons de la province. Parmi ces châteaux, les uns sont libres, les autres assujettis aux Arabes [these are the Ma'qīl Arabs mentioned earlier].²³⁶

[...]

Quand tout le monde était d'accord, on avait construit à peu de frais des murs pour empêcher l'incursion des cavaliers arabes. Tant que les gens sont restés unis, avec une volonté commune, ils sont demeurés libres. Mais des partis s'étant formés, on a démoli des murs et chacun a appelé les Arabes pour se défendre. Aussi ces gens sont-ils devenus les sujets et presque les esclaves des Arabes.²³⁷

Although Leo Africanus does not mention why the inhabitants decided to murder the Marinid governor, it is hard to imagine what the Marinids had to offer to the local population at this point. Their departure proved disastrous to the city however, as the now divided population abandoned the town in favor of the "châteaux," or *qṣar*, a type of fortified house that still dominate the modern-day city of Rissani.²³⁸ The Ma'qīl Arabs, who up to this point had either supported the reigning sultan or a Marinid contender, emerged as the new lords of the region.

²³⁵ Ibn Khaldūn, *Tārīkh* 7, 714-720; The splitting of Morocco into a kingdom of Fez and kingdom of Marrakech is a recurring theme within Moroccan history. In fact, the English name for Morocco is derived from the kingdom of Marrakech, whereas in Turkish speaking countries, Morocco is known as *Fas*, named after the kingdom of Fes.

²³⁶ L'Africain, *Description*, 425.

²³⁷ L'Africain, 429.

²³⁸ Rissani was build next to the ruins of Sijilmāsa and its *qṣūr* are still an impressive sight to behold, the city is practically made up by a large number of castles, build closely together.

The rise of the Ma'qīl as regional lords and the emergence of a Marrakech kingdom touch upon an interesting feature of the period: the lack of a new centralized state. Unlike the previous century, no new tribal coalition emerged to topple and replace the moribund empire with a new state. Instead, the Marinid Empire imploded into various regional polities that seemingly lacked the ambition or the means to extend their influence over a larger region. It allowed the Marinid dynasty itself to linger on for many more decades, ruling little more than Fes and its surrounding lands. The last Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥaqq II (r. 1420-1465), lost his life in a city revolt in 1465, and after a short interregnum, was succeeded by one of his viziers, who founded a new and equally powerless dynasty.²³⁹

Based on the correlation between the decline of the European mints and the increasing paralysis of the Marinid Empire to deal with its problems it seems very plausible that a lack of African gold was an important reason for the demise of the Marinid Empire. From a numismatic perspective, the fall of the Marinids meant the end of a centuries-long practice of minting gold coins. For the last two Marinid rulers, we lack any examples of golden coins, and there are almost no examples for the entire century following 'Abd al-Ḥaqq's II death.²⁴⁰ A lack of gold may also explain why there was no new dynasty or political force that could replace the Marinids like the Marinids had replaced the Almohads before. It were the Portuguese who filled the void left behind by the Marinids in the Maghreb. Their appearance in Morocco can be seen as a sign that the Trans-Saharan trade had changed.

In 1415, Portuguese forces conquered Ceuta, which marked the beginning of a new era in Iberian-North African relationships. The conquest prompted a reaction from sultan Abū Sa'īd 'Uthmān III (r. 1399-1420), who attempted to retake the town in 1419. His defeat at the hands of defending Portuguese forces was one the last notable military actions of the Marinid Empire.²⁴¹ For the Portuguese, the conquest started a period of overseas expansion, that initially was focused on the Maghreb. They repeatedly attempted to conquer Tangier throughout most of the 15th century, until it finally fell in 1471. Although the largest Portuguese presence was in the north of Morocco, they continually expanded their presence along the Atlantic coast by capturing towns or building fortresses.²⁴²

There were many reasons for the Portuguese expansion. In many ways, the expansion was a continuation of the Reconquista that had played a major role throughout much of

²³⁹ Mediano, "The post-Almohad dynasties", 116-117.

²⁴⁰ Harry W. Hazard, *The Numismatic History of Late Medieval North Africa* (New York: The American Numismatic Society, 1952), 227.

²⁴¹ Abun-Nasr, *A History of the Maghrib*, 114.

²⁴² Abun-Nasr, 207-208.

Portugal's early history. The strait of Gibraltar was not yet the boundary of two different worlds as it is often perceived today, but rather the connecting force between two closely interlinked regions. Following the successful conquest of the Algarve (from the Arabic *al-Gharb*) the Moroccan Gharb was a logical next objective for the Portuguese crusading efforts.²⁴³ But there were clear economic dimensions as well. As mentioned in chapter one, Ceuta was an important link between the Trans-Saharan trade networks and those of the Mediterranean. Ceuta's conquest was the first step in a Portuguese search for African gold.

Like the rest of Europe, the kingdom of Portugal had been affected by the great bullion crisis. Between 1383 and 1435, the Portuguese mints had failed to strike a single gold coin.²⁴⁴ The 80s and 90s of the 14th century were also dominated by a series of devaluations of silver coins, which coincided with a prolonged conflict with Castile, but likewise fitted the wider economic patterns described by Day.²⁴⁵ It was against this backdrop that the Portuguese conquered Ceuta, an important source of gold for European merchants. Although not yielding the results they had hoped for, the proceedings of their North African possessions enabled the Portuguese to mint a low-quality albeit new series of gold coins in 1436.²⁴⁶ In the next few years, the Portuguese, under the command of Henry the Navigator (d. 1460), sailed down the Atlantic Coast in search for the fabled wealth of the Mali Empire.²⁴⁷

The Portuguese finally succeeded in their efforts in 1471 when they stumbled upon what became known as the Gold Coast (which more or less corresponds with the coast of modern-day Ghana). European traders were able to purchase so much gold in this region from the Akan, that the Portuguese king João II (d. 1495) proclaimed a crown monopoly on trading in the region and ordered the construction of a fortress. The fortress was built in 1482 and became known as Elmina, "the Mine."²⁴⁸ Although Elmina would become infamous for its role as a departure point for enslaved people to the Americas, the Portuguese mostly sold slaves at Elmina during this period, as slaves were much in want by the Akan.²⁴⁹ Surviving charters from

²⁴³ A.R. Disney, *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire: From Beginnings to 1807: The Portuguese Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-2.

²⁴⁴ Day, "Great Bullion Famine," 23.

²⁴⁵ Leonor Freire Costa, Pedro Laine and Susana Münch Miranda, *An Economic History of Portugal: 1143-2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 42-43.

²⁴⁶ Disney, *A History of Portugal 2*, 14.

²⁴⁷ P. E. H. Hair, *The Founding of the Castelo de São Jorge da Mina: An Analysis of the Sources* (USA: The Board of Regents University of Wisconsin System, 1994), 13.

²⁴⁸ Disney, *History of Portugal 2*, 57.

²⁴⁹ Slaves made up about 10% of the Portuguese exports to Elmina, other products sold by the Portuguese show how items from the Trans Saharan trade had shaped Akan preferences, with items such as brass, salt, and Maghrebi cloth being sold by the Portuguese, see Wilks, *Forests of Gold*, 22-23; the Akan desire for slaves

Elmina show that the Portuguese were able to acquire 227 kilo in gold annually between 1487-89 and 637 kg annually between 1494-96.²⁵⁰ These quantities of gold enabled Portugal to transform from a relative poor and small kingdom on the fringe of both the Christian and Islamic worlds to a world power in its own right within just a few years.

The rise of the Portuguese Empire is important for understanding the Marinid decline, as it was closely linked to the dramatic change that had occurred within the Trans-Saharan trade. As historian David Abulafia notes:

The gold of Africa, for sheer quantity, had no real rival in the medieval world. [...] Access to African gold helped assure the economic primacy of the Muslim shores of the Mediterranean over Iraq, Iran or Byzantium, and, after 1200, it helped build the economic success of the Christian shores of the Mediterranean and the decisive dominance of the Italians and the Catalans. It is no surprise that Henry the Navigator and his successors should have sought to tap African gold from new outlets and to cheat Egypt of its traditional sources of the metal.²⁵¹

The shortage of gold created an important incentive for the Portuguese to mount their overseas campaigns and explorations. The shortage also created the opportunities for doing so, as the Marinid decline created a vacuum the Portuguese could exploit. Once the Portuguese were able to establish a monopoly of a new overseas gold route at Elmina, the monopoly gave the Portuguese a position that was quite similar to those of the Marinids. Although the volume of gold in the Elmina trade never reached the level of the Trans-Saharan trade, it was more than enough to give Portugal an enormous economic advantage over its competitors. An advantage it was able to maintain for almost a century, until new sources of gold and silver from the Americas reshaped the entire world economy.²⁵²

In summary, it can be said that Day's great bullion famine theory allows us to see different causes for the Marinid decline. The collapse of the Marinid state was not an isolated event. The timing of the onset of Portuguese expansion and the importance of African gold as its financial motor show how a reduced output of gold from the Trans-Saharan trade may have

during this period can be seen as a consequence of the Black Death in West Africa, see Chouin, "The 'Big Bang' Theory Reconsidered," 9.

²⁵⁰ Wilks, *Forests of Gold*, 4.

²⁵¹ David Abulafia, "Asia, Africa and the trade of Medieval Europe," in *the Cambridge Economic History of Europe from the Decline of the Roman Empire 2*, ed. Edward Miller, Cynthia Postan and M. M. Postan, 2nd ed., 402-473 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 470; doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521087094.008.

²⁵² Disney, *History of Portugal 2*, 143-171, particularly his remarks on gold on 148, also see 177-178.

shaped events far beyond the shores of the Sahara. Marinid power was largely based on the ability of the state to build and finance socio-economic institutions and a large professional military force. Just as for the Portuguese, African gold likewise served as the motor for Marinid power. But Day's data shows that the influx of gold from West Africa dramatically fell somewhere around 1370. Consequentially, the next few decades were marked by major economic crises throughout Europe and the Middle East. For the Marinids, who unlike their contemporaries were almost singularly dependent on a steady supply of African gold, the declining influx proved to be fatal.

Conclusion



Image 6: Marinid-era gate at Sijilmāsa. *Photo taken by Lennart Visser*

This thesis is an attempt to place the decline of the Marinid Empire in a wider perspective, in order to gain a better understanding of the causes behind the decline. Although long considered to be a weak and ineffective polity in modern historiography, the Marinid Empire was perhaps one of the wealthiest polities of the medieval world for over a century. By controlling and facilitating the Trans-Saharan trade networks, the Marinids had access to the largest source of gold in the medieval world, which enabled the Marinids to become an important regional polity. Their relative short reign and quick collapse however, cast a shadow over their legacy. But what caused their collapse? This thesis focused on the influence of the Black Death and its possible causative role in the decline of the Trans-Saharan gold trade. Although based on the evidence gathered in this thesis it would go too far to say that it clearly did so, there are some extraordinary correlations that, in my opinion, cannot be ignored.

As shown in chapter two, there is a remarkable temporal correlation between the demographic collapse in West Africa and the arrival of the Black Death in Europe and North Africa. Although it was long thought the Black Death never reached West Africa, the dramatic archeological data gathered by Chouin and others make it very plausible that it did. The staggering loss of human life during this period had a destabilizing effect on the Mali Empire that lost all of its fabled wealth and nearly collapsed during the reign of Mārī Jātā II between 1360-1374. These dates are relatively late compared to the arrival of the Black Death in the Mediterranean, but are none the less plausible as the inhospitable Sahara may have slowed the spread of the disease considerably. The remarks on the army of god found in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* further suggest that the Mali Empire greatly suffered from mass depopulation during this period.

The next important correlation is between the archeological data described above and the great bullion famine that struck both Europe and the Middle East. As the West African subcontinent was possibly being shaken by the arrival of the Black Death, the societies of Europe were suffering from a sever lack of bullion. Day's data shows us that the European mints started to collapse from 1370 onwards, halving their output of gold coins with each new decade, until almost all mints were unable to strike a single coin by the early 1400s. Looking at Day's data the collapse feels sudden, as the output of European mints had been climbing steadily for many decades. As almost all of the gold struck at European mints originated from West Africa, a causal relation between the West African demographic collapse and the collapse of the European gold output is plausible and must be considered. It also strengthens the idea that the Black Death arrived a few decades later in West Africa than it did in Europe, as the data from Day more or less fits with the reign of Mārī Jātā II.

When we compare the above with the Marinid decline we see some remarkable parallels. When the Black Death reached North Africa in 1348, it had a direct political effect on the Marinid Empire. After Abū Ḥassan's army was ravaged by the Black Death, his political fate was sealed when Abū 'Inān Fāris rose against him in rebellion. Although Abū 'Inān's reign was in many ways a continuation of his father's, his usurpation of the throne seemingly planted the seeds for the succession crisis that broke out after Abū 'Inān's own death in 1358. These years were extremely chaotic from a dynastic perspective, as some single years saw multiple rulers on the throne in Fes, with many more contenders seizing power in the provinces. From a more structural perspective, there seems to have been relatively few changes during this period. Undeterred by the chaos at court, the armies of the central government proved too strong for the many regional contenders. But as Day's data suggests, gold was still being carried over the Sahara in large quantities, which means the Marinid forces could still be paid.

It is only from the 1370s onwards that the Marinid Empire started to disintegrate. After the death of 'Abd al-Azīz in 1372, the characteristic troubles began that made the Marinids so infamous in modern historiography. Although the long reign of Abū al-'Abās provided dynastic stability, the court increasingly seemed to be unable to govern much territory beyond the surroundings of Fes. Where the Marinid army played a pivotal role during the succession crisis, they are notably absent from this time onwards. It is more than notable that their role started to diminish in the same decade the European halved their yearly output of gold for the first time. It suggests that, like the European mints, the Marinid treasury was deeply affected by the events taking place in West Africa.

Looking at these parallels, it becomes possible to suggest a new hypothesis for the Marinid decline. Not tribal anarchy, but the end of a political economic system that had characterized North Africa for centuries, was the primary cause for the Marinid decline. For centuries, the great medieval North African dynasties had relied on a steady influx of West African gold as the economic foundation for their political ambitions. This influx seems to have been greatly reduced after the West African demographic collapse, likely caused by the arrival of the Black Death. This in turn, spelled doom for the last of these great North African dynasties, the Marinids. With the economic bedrock of these dynasties gone, there was no political force to take over. Instead, a power vacuum emerged that would not be filled for over a century. Further research will hopefully prove whether the above-described correlations are indeed closely connected.

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